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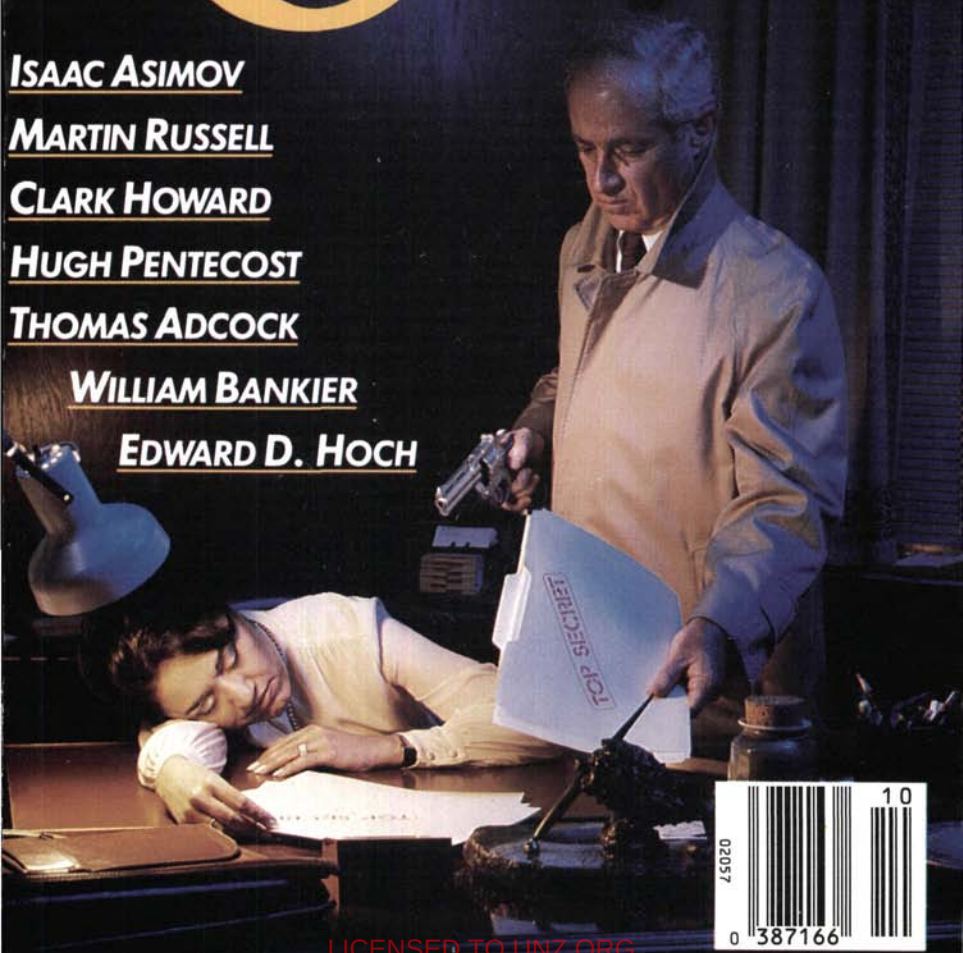

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THE WORLD'S LEADING MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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first publication in the U.S.

This heartbreaking story is from a collection, The Darker Side of Death, *published last year in the author's native England by William Collins Sons. Mr. Russell has been publishing novels here and in England since 1966. Of one,* Mr. T. *(published in the U.S. as* The Man Without a Name *in 1977), Reginald Hill said: "A book like* Mr. T., *which starts with the intriguing situation of a man arriving home to find that his wife does not recognize him and claims her husband has been dead for months, shows Russell at his best. His canvas is by choice small but his rapid sketches thereon can give a disproportionate amount of pleasure."*

We welcome Mr. Russell to EQMM and hope to bring you more of his incisive fiction very soon . . .

BYE-BYE, SHIMMY

by MARTIN RUSSELL

"Her name's Shimmy," said Mike. "She's eight months old. Getting on for nine."

"She's beautiful." The schoolgirl extended slim fingers to be licked. "Why do you call her Shimmy?"

"If you watch her from behind, trotting along," Mike explained, "you'll see why."

The girl laughed, rumpling with her other hand the glossy nape fur of the spaniel. "Can't help the way you walk, can you, Shimmy?"

Her laughter was low, amused but moderate, an expression of pure appreciation without excess. Her knees as she crouched were rounded below her plain, dark skirt. Gazing upward into her face, Shimmy administered a solemn tongue-flick to the tip of her nose. The child's laugh became a giggle.

"Shimmy!" reproved Mike. "You're not to."

"I don't mind."

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"Have you got a dog?"

"No," the girl said sadly. "We've got a cat. We had two, but one went missing."

"That's a shame. No idea what became of it?"

She shook her head. "They say there are gangs going about, snatching pets for—you know. Experiments."

"Oh, Lord. I hope not."

"I don't think about it. I can't. Do you let Shimmy off the leash?"

"Up to now," Mike admitted, "I haven't dared."

The girl rose and they both stood looking down at the spaniel, whose attention had been seized by some movement, real or imagined, in a distant corner of the park; it stood with forelegs planted firmly apart, raptly at gaze. "She's very skittish," he elaborated. "I'm afraid she might bolt."

"Not worth risking," the girl agreed. She looked thoughtful. "You could try one of those extending leads—like a fishing line. I've seen people using them."

"It's an idea. I might give it a whirl."

Side by side, they began moving slowly toward the park exit. After initial resistance, Shimmy came along with fast-mounting gusto, snorting against the collar, hind legs pounding sturdily into the turf like a rabbit's. Mike held on diligently. The girl, whose head of brunette hair came up to his shoulder, regarded the dog with a kind of detached fondness: she reminded him of a besotted mother trying hard, in the company of others, to be realistic and non-tedious about the entire subject of parenthood. He liked the style of her hair. Hatless, she wore it in a series of controlled festoons around a face that seemed to have arrived at maturity well before its time. But for this, he would have described her features as elfin. If he had ever had a daughter, this was the model he might have selected from some celestial brochure. She walked neatly, unhurried, responsible. He glanced at his watch. "What time do you have to be at school?"

"Nine-fifteen." The air of maturity dissolved in a solution of childish rebellion.

"Sounds as if you don't care for it much."

"I like school," she averred. "Only it's English, first period."

"And you're not hooked on English?"

"It's Miss Barkworth. She hates me."

"I'm sure she can't do."

"She's always making fun of me. Whatever I do isn't right. We've

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got her again this afternoon," the girl said despondently. "She teaches history, too."

"What subjects do you prefer?" Mike inquired. They were almost at the park gates. A middle-aged man in City suit and bowler, using a furled umbrella as a walking-stick, stood pondering an ornamental flowerbed laid out by a beneficent local authority at the ratepayer's expense. Mike had seen him several times before. They had reached the nodding stage, and in a few weeks' time might well be exchanging stiff " 'Mornings." Turning from his contemplation of the salvias, the man gave the schoolgirl a brief though searching glance before awarding Mike his nod, then went on his way through the park toward the railway station beyond the far side. For London commuters, the route provided a daily taste of urban countryside. Alongside the path were steep grassy slopes, topped by trees and shrub thickets; downland in miniature. Neighborhood folk were jealous of the park's character. A local councilor had once suggested leveling it to accommodate soccer pitches: *he* had been pitched out at the next election.

"I like science," announced the child, after some thought.

"Any particular kind?"

"We only do chemistry."

"I was never any good at that," Mike confessed. "How about maths?"

"I like it, but I'm no good at it."

He rubbed his neck. "Sounds contradictory."

She looked up at him with a beguiling grin. "Mr. Bradshaw teaches us maths. He's great."

Mike threw back his head in a guffaw that was a shade louder than it might have been, masking a sudden ripple of jealousy in respect of the unknown but great Mr. Bradshaw. "That explains it. Any maths periods today?"

Her face fell. "No. Not till tomorrow." She cheered up. "But then it's a double period, straight after lunch."

"Something to look forward to." They had reached the main road. Hauling Shimmy away from the curbside, Mike shortened the leash and established the dog in roughly the right direction for home. "Have a nice day," he advised, not displeased with the transatlantic flavor of the remark. "Don't let Miss Barkworth get you down."

"I won't," the child said cheerfully. "Bye, Shimmy. Be a good girl."

Lurching homeward behind a spaniel with the scent of arrival in her nostrils, Mike held the image of the girl's face in his mind while

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dwelling with pleasure and relief upon the thought that not everything one read about today's younger generation was necessarily accurate. To his sister, clearing away breakfast dishes in the kitchen, he recounted the events of the walk, as was his custom, leaving until last the episode of the schoolgirl in the park. "Intelligent little thing," he remarked, struggling to remove Shimmy's collar. "Quite restored one's faith in modern childhood. Shimmy captivated her."

"She does most people," his sister retorted. A small, sharp-featured woman of nearly sixty, seven years his senior, she had a brain and a tongue to match her appearance. In her presence, Mike trod softly. She threw him an acute look over the frying-pan she was wiping. "How old was she, this girl?"

"I suppose—around twelve." Releasing Shimmy into the hall, Mike hung the collar and leash on their hook before helping himself to the remaining coffee in the pot that had been put aside for him. "Older than her years, though, in some ways. Cute kid. I thought they'd stopped making 'em like that."

"What would a bachelor know about it?" His sister returned the pan briskly to its rack. "Underneath the charm, she's probably a knowing little hussy."

"No need to wreck my illusions, Beth," he protested mildly. "I like to think there's still some innocence around."

Taking his cup and the newspaper into the living room, he browsed for twenty minutes before leaving by the patio door and treading the flagstone path to his garage workshop. He had a pinewood dresser to finish for Mrs. Swift along the street. After that there was a requirement for a cocktail cabinet from the Mathesons at Stable Cottage, in The Crescent. Mike liked a full order book. Besides giving life a purpose, it kept him from under Beth's feet. They lived together quite amicably as long as they were apart most of the time.

Several days elapsed before he again met the schoolgirl in the park.

The fine spell had broken. She had covered her festooned hair with a rain-hat and was wearing a short, translucent waterproof jacket over her striped blazer. When he first spotted her she looked abstracted, as though preoccupied with school concerns—the idolized Mr. Bradshaw, perhaps?—but at the sight of Shimmy she returned delightedly to her surroundings and, regardless of the wet grass, sank to her knees to enable the spaniel to give her a greeting proper to its instincts. "Shimmy—Shimmy—" she murmured into its

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shaggy left ear. "You're getting a podge, did you know that? You must watch your diet."

"She has the scraps out of dishes," Mike said apologetically. "I tell my sister she shouldn't, but you know how it is."

"Shimmy, you're a greedy-guts."

"She is, that's true. I think I'll take her around the Thorne Estate this morning, work some of it off. How's school?"

The girl wrinkled her nose. "English twice today," she said dejectedly.

"Oh, dear. The dreaded Miss Barker."

"Barkworth. Barky, we call her. She gave me an extra poem to learn."

"How rotten. Why?"

"For slamming the desk lid when she was reading from *David Copperfield*. I didn't mean to. It slipped."

"That seems unfair."

"She's always doing it," the child said philosophically.

"I thought you seemed a bit worried this morning."

"Not about her." Straightening up, the girl glanced across the park to focus upon the children's play area. Mike, whose long-distance eyesight was poor, gained a blurred impression of a figure on one of the swings, pendulating languidly. "I don't like the look of *him*," said the girl, resuming course for the gate.

"Have you noticed him before?"

"He's often around. Just sits there and stares. Gives me the shudders."

"Is he young? I can't see very well."

"Oh, no. He must be over twenty. I wish he'd go away. Do you live far?" asked the girl, patting Shimmy as the dog wriggled into the space between them.

"Half a mile. Oaks Avenue." Mike spoke a little absently. He was giving some thought to the aging twenty-year-old on the swing. Perfectly harmless, in all probability. An idler or one of the unemployed, with time on his hands, poor wretch. The girl, though, was right to be cautious. The hazard was there, although it was not great as long as she kept to the main path. At the times she came through, somebody else was generally likely to be about. The bowler-hatted City commuter, for example, who on the previous occasion had made rather a point of demonstrating that he had not failed to notice the pair of them together, Mike and the child. Life could be awkward. The complications were endless.

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"I've got an auntie," volunteered the girl, "in Oaks Avenue."

"You have?"

"Well, she's not really my auntie. She's a friend of my mum's. I call on her sometimes. She's fabulous."

"Gives you tea, does she?"

The wide smile traveled up to him. "Iced buns," the child said reverently.

"My. They're favorites of mine. I'll have to get acquainted with your auntie myself. Do you have a tuckshop at school?"

She shook her head. "We can buy rolls from a kiosk at morning break, but there's no proper shop. We're organizing a petition for one."

"Hope you have some luck. You turn right here, don't you? See you again. Take care."

"Bye-bye, Shimmy. Don't you go eating too much." The child gave the spaniel a pat on the rump before turning away. "You'll ruin your figure," she warned over her shoulder. With a little skip, she started uphill toward the school.

Before setting off for home, Mike went into the newsagent's for a copy of *DIY Monthly*. He liked to keep track of trends. The shop's owner cast him an indulgent look. "Getting off with the schoolgirls, Mr. Owen? Better watch it. You know what they say about juvenile crushes on older men."

"Believe it or not," Mike informed him, pocketing his change, "we were chatting about food."

"Nice to be young again," the shop owner said lugubriously. "Eat what you please. No weight problems."

Indeed, Mike reflected as he plodded home, the girl was lath-slim. Sticky buns evidently did her no harm—yet. Would it be indiscreet to—? Yes, it would. Accepting confectionery from strangers was undoubtedly top of any schoolchild's proscribed list, these days more than ever in the past. Mike sighed. He found himself worrying about the young man in the park. Suppose he carried a bag of sweets? A quiet word, perhaps, with someone at the local police station. Not trouble-making: just a precaution. He decided to give serious thought to the idea.

When Beth asked him about the walk, he delayed any mention of the girl until the end, sliding it in as an apparent afterthought. Beth gave him one of her harder looks. "You mean the one you met the other morning? The innocent little charmer?"

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"She always goes through the park at the same time," Mike explained. "If I take Shimmy that way, naturally we meet."

"Naturally."

For the next few mornings, Mike avoided the park. He would have found it hard to explain, even to himself, why he should do such a thing. It was depriving Shimmy of a much-needed scamper; and it was denying himself a small pleasure of such harmlessness that it was laughable, absurd, to imagine that anyone might ascribe a questionable motivation to his actions. And yet, somehow, there it was. For the time being, he couldn't bring himself to enter the park again.

Shimmy, for her part, took all that failed to come her way with supreme good nature. If she missed the grassed expanses, she made no detectable protest. She could find interest in a garden gatepost or a road bollard. An accommodating dog. However, she was getting noticeably plumper.

Mike didn't go to the police station. The risk, he had decided, was minimal: it was summer, the daylight was abundant, and there were always responsible people walking through the park. Besides which, schoolgirls these days knew what was what. They could look after themselves. The particular young lady he had in mind had shown, by her speech and actions, that she was fully alert to danger. Who was he to interfere? The police had enough to do without being urged to hound people who were doing no manifest harm to anyone.

On a Thursday afternoon at the beginning of July, Beth found that she needed a postal order and some stamps.

"I must write to Aunt Marjorie," she declared. "It's her birthday on Saturday and she'll expect to hear. She looks forward to her five pounds. Unless it's posted tonight or tomorrow morning—"

"I'll nip down to the shop," Mike offered.

"All right. And take Shimmy."

"No. I can't handle cash with her tugging at me. I'll manage better by myself."

The newsagent's by the park entrance was also the sub-post office. Reaching it via the main road, Mike obtained the things that Beth needed and a copy of the evening paper for himself. On impulse, he also bought his sister a slab of her favorite fruit-and-nut milk chocolate. The shop owner, who was filling in as sub-postmaster for the afternoon, leaned forward to peer through the glass panel. "No four-legged friend today, Mr. Owen? Not off-song, I hope?"

"She's fine. I was in a bit of a hurry, so I left her behind."

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"That'll be seven pounds thirty altogether. Don't eat the whole slab at once, will you?"

Mike gave him a wink. "It's not for me."

Outside the shop, he hesitated briefly before heading for the park gate. It was a quicker way home, and at three in the afternoon he would be just ahead of the school exodus. And he hadn't admired the salvias for a week. They were, he discovered, as refulgent as ever, pert from the showery weather that had followed the heat wave. He stood for a minute or so, surveying the bed. The park was cocooned in midafternoon peacefulness. He was glad he hadn't brought Shimmy. She would have dragged him off to explore a hilltop shrubbery, robbed him of his moments of reflective renewal.

Suddenly he felt hungry. Having worked through to complete an order, he had missed lunch and was starting to feel the lack of it. Feeling for the chocolate bar, he broke off a third and ate it, square by square, with a half-guilty but sensual enjoyment while circumnavigating the flowerbed as a prelude to heading for the opposite side of the park and the way out. It was while he was so engaged that his gaze drifted across to the corner playground and settled hazily upon the shape occupying one of the swings. Indistinct though it was, he felt sure that it was not the figure of a child.

Slightly altering course, he followed a path that took him closer to the play area before bending away in the direction he wanted. At the nearest point, he was able to get a clearer picture of the figure on the swing. An unshaven man in his early twenties, clad in jeans and bomber jacket over a checked shirt, he was sitting with an air of indolence, staring across the park at the main-road gate. Mike gave him an intent look, which the man ignored.

Pursuing the path as it veered back, Mike tried to commit to memory details of the young man's appearance. Copious brown hair, swept untidily back. A saturnine, brooding face. There was little else to grasp. Before leaving the park, he looked back, in time to see the figure detach itself from the swing and begin to saunter toward a clump of conifers at the foot of a steep bank which flanked the park on that side. Aimless. The word should have summarized the man's demeanor, and yet somehow it fell short. There had been something else: an extra dimension that he couldn't identify.

Reaching the mouth of his own street, Mike hesitated again.

The police station was half a mile farther on. There and back, the diversion would cost him another half hour at least, and Beth was

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waiting for her postal order. He turned into Oaks Avenue and walked smartly home.

When he got inside, he didn't tell his sister about the partly consumed chocolate bar. Now that it was started, he might as well finish it off. He would buy her a replacement next morning.

But he did tell her about the man in the park. "I'm wondering," he said, "if I ought to tip the wink to the police."

"What were you doing in the park?" demanded Beth.

"I just thought I'd come back that way. It's pleasanter."

"Except for the prowlers." She gave her brother a penetrative survey. "What were you thinking of saying to the police, exactly?"

Mike shrugged. "Suggest they check up on him, in a quiet way. He may be quite harmless, but he does seem to hang around the kids' section a fair bit. I wouldn't want to feel I'd been remiss if anything—"

"If anything what?"

"You read of all kinds of things happening, these days," Mike said uncomfortably.

"Not just these days." Beth paused for her words to sink in. "I wouldn't bother about it now," she continued briskly. "I might call myself tomorrow, on my way into town. Just mention it to them. If that would settle your mind."

"Better than nothing," Mike said quietly.

That night he slept badly. He never passed a completely restful night, but about once a month his internal wiring, as he phrased it to himself, seemed to go berserk. During these phases he awoke regularly every fifteen minutes from a series of weird kaleidoscopical images that could barely be described as dreams, and he sweated a lot. This time it was really bad. It began the moment his head touched the pillow, which instantly became filled with jagged rocks instead of duck feathers and in no time succeeded in creating a burning sensation inside his right ear. He perspired and tossed. His mouth felt sulphurous. Tiny, unidentifiable sounds tormented him. He had no dreams, for the sufficient reason that sleep eluded him completely.

At midnight he made coffee, and again at three in the morning. He also nibbled a few more squares of the chocolate. If the night was a lost cause, he reasoned, he might as well put the failure to some advantage. He read *DIY Monthly* from cover to cover. As he stared at the print, obscure thoughts and images trotted across the horizon

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of his consciousness, defying definition. At six o'clock he could no longer endure the confinement of his room. Creeping downstairs, he informed a surprised Shimmy that he was taking her for a walk to clear his head. The early streets greeted them like unexpected guests, granting a reserved welcome overlaid with touches of resentment. Rain splinters drifted in the breeze. Allowing the dog to set the pace, Mike followed in the wake of her pistoning hindquarters, relishing escape.

He returned with an appetite for bacon. He told Beth he had slept quite well.

"Thought I heard you moving about." She had to raise her voice to compete with the Radio Four announcer.

"I did take Shimmy for an early hike."

"Whatever for?"

"Just felt like it." He glanced up from his plate. "No harm, is there? She enjoyed it."

"Can't see the sense, myself." His sister was a woman of routine. "You're not taking her again, afterwards?"

"A quickie, perhaps. I want to get on with that table for the—"

Mike paused. Something that the announcer was saying had tugged at the fringe of his attention. "Listen a moment."

The announcer was alluding to a police search. "Having covered the route taken by Susan to school, they're now switching their attention to other neighborhoods which are known to have been visited by the girl on recent occasions. In particular—"

"Another missing child," sniffed Beth. "What were you saying about a table?"

"Listen, listen."

"—the street of a relative with whom she sometimes has tea. Emphasizing that Susan had been missing for only one night, a police spokesman said that the fact that she was a level-headed child who was not in the habit of—"

Beth flicked off the radio. "Just what they always say."

Mike gazed at her in anguish. "I wanted to hear the rest."

"Why? There's nothing we can do."

"How do you know?"

His sister eyed him. "You sound quite upset. Do you think you might be acquainted with this Susan who's gone missing?"

"I'd simply like to have heard, that's all."

"Too soon in the morning to be morbid." Beth engineered another

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sniff. "You'd do better getting on with some work. Pass me the plate, if you're finished."

Although he worked assiduously all morning upon the pinewood table for the Pitt-Joneses, Mike found less than his usual satisfaction in the task. To an extent, he felt that he was under auto-pilotage. He might have put it down to the sleepless night, but insomnia had never had this effect on him before. At midday he knocked off.

He returned to the house, hoping to find that Beth was out shopping. She was, however, in full cry around the kitchen units, and there was no chance of his getting to the radio without her intervention. The morning newspaper had said nothing about a missing girl. There was, he believed, a twelve-thirty news bulletin on TV, but if he tried switching on the set in the living room Beth could be relied upon to erupt from the kitchen at precisely the moment to catch him at it. Viewing of any kind prior to five-thirty in the afternoon was, to her, anathema.

After lunch, he trudged back to the garage. For a couple of hours, until four, he forced himself to plane and saw and miter. By that time, it was reasonable for him to take Shimmy for her afternoon walk and to buy the evening paper. As a special treat for the spaniel, he took the park route. That was all it was, a bonus for Shimmy. She had put up with hard pavements stoically for too long.

When they got there, it was to find—to Shimmy's delight—a rival occupation force of assorted juveniles, which sent Mike, in some dismay, to the perimeter fence in a bid to avoid balloon-tired cycles and rocket-propelled footballs. The park at this time of day was a different kettle of fish from the park at eight in the morning. Diverting, with some difficulty, Shimmy's attention from the rival attractions, he hugged the fence as it mounted a hillock and pursued an erratic course between thickets and bramble-patches. Thirty percent of the park's forty acres, he discovered, was barely navigable. Such footpaths as existed tended to expire in the midst of clumps of tangled foliage and he had to keep doubling back.

Shimmy was in ecstasy. Plunging into and out of undergrowth, she subjected to a stern test the extending lead that Mike had finally acquired for her. It gave her a degree of controllable freedom, justifying the outlay. Experimentally he played her in and out, like an angler subduing a fish. After a few minutes the inevitable happened. Vanishing into a clump of particularly dense foliage on a slope leading down to the perimeter ditch, Shimmy took the line off to the right and jammed it solid.

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Mike called sharply, "Shimmy! Come back here."

He could hear excited snufflings, rustles, a growl or two. "Stay where you are," he told her. "I'll have to come and get you disentangled."

Leaves and twigs stung his face. Crouched almost double, he battled into the core of the clump, following the snagged line from point to point. Shimmy's vibrating rear became visible. His calls fell upon deaf ears. "What is it?" Mike demanded. "A hedgehog? They're full of fleas. Stay clear of—"

The words stagnated in his throat, choking him. By now he had reached the spot where the spaniel had exhausted the extent of her liberty, and he could see what she had seen.

At the police station, they seemed to consider that he needed strong tea. A cup was planted at his elbow and somebody kept hovering, as though avid to replenish the contents. Tea, as it happened, was low on Mike's present list of priorities. He didn't feel ill, shocked, stupefied. He felt nothing. The questions they asked he answered mechanically, clearing his throat repeatedly because it seemed to have become congested by dust from the undergrowth. He had a vague notion that he was disheveled. Shimmy, after an initial frenzy of exploration, lay resignedly on the tiled floor at his feet, jowls and ears spread, awaiting the resumption of the walk.

The man putting the questions was a Chief Inspector Adams. That much Mike had taken in quite clearly. The questions themselves were cloudier, but he did his best.

"How come, Mr. Owen, that you chanced to investigate that particular patch of undergrowth this particular afternoon?"

"It was her." He indicated Shimmy. "She dived in."

"You always take her that way?"

"Which way?"

"Over the hilly part, near the fence."

"Not normally. It was quieter. There were a good few kids about."

"Annoy you, do they? Kids?"

"How do you mean?"

Patiently, the Chief Inspector rephrased the query. "You're apt to steer clear of children as a rule?"

"When I'm with her." Again he nodded down at the red-gold fur. "She's a shade temperamental."

"Why go through the park at all, then?"

"It gives her a gallop."

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"You always have her with you when you walk through the park?"

"Generally speaking." Mike guided the cup of stewing tea cautiously aside with his elbow. "Would she have felt much, do you suppose?"

Adams studied him with some care. "Who are you referring to?"

"The little girl. Would she have suffered?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe you can tell us, Mr. Owen?"

Mike closed his eyes. He felt as if he were plunging uncontrollably forward, head over heels through deep space, beyond the pull of gravity. He reopened them. "You think I did it?"

"I'm asking you."

"You're not. You're making an accusation."

The Chief Inspector strolled away to the end of the room, did a turn, came back. "We've been talking," he confided, "to your sister."

"Beth? What did she have to say?"

"She just filled us in a little. You've been living with her some while, I understand."

"Eighteen years, five months."

"You've forgotten the weeks," the other reminded him, half humorously.

"No, I haven't. It was exactly—"

"Did you move in with her from choice?"

"I wasn't given a choice."

"How come?"

Mike glanced up. "If Beth's filled you in, you ought to know."

"I'd have liked to hear it from you." With a delicate cough, Adams looked sidelong at his assistant who was taking notes. "As I understand it, the vital factor was a court appearance—am I right? Remember that, Mr. Owen?"

The wavy fur on the back of Shimmy's neck gave a twitch. Mike sat examining it. The Chief Inspector waited.

Presently he resumed. "Not exactly a pleasant case, was it? Nobody cares much for child molestation. In your case there were thought to be certain mitigating circumstances—the behavior of the girl involved, for a start—which explains why you were given probation, on stated conditions. The main condition being that you went to live with your sister, who undertook to—"

"Since you know all this, why make a song about it?"

"You don't feel it might possibly have some relevance to—current events?"

Painfully, Mike rehashed his thoughts into a modified shape. He

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tried to keep his phrases concise. "I did talk to the kid. Susan, I mean. Twice. She took an interest in the dog. Bright youngster, she was. You think I'd have done that to her?"

"I'm not paid to conjecture, Mr. Owen."

"Perhaps you're paid to jump to conclusions? I'm not sure where that leaves me. All I can do is—is—tell God's truth. I never saw her yesterday. I've never touched her."

"Nor given her anything?"

"Like what?"

Reaching out to the desk behind him, Adam produced and displayed something on the palm of his hand. "Found," he said, "next to the body. It was—"

"*Her* body."

"What?"

"*Her* body. It didn't belong to anyone else."

"Her body. Half a slab of chocolate." Adams reached behind him again. "This was found in your jacket pocket. Four remaining squares, in a torn wrapper. Fruit-and-nut. Same chocolate, same brand. Mean anything to you, Mr. Owen?"

"Susan wouldn't have accepted anything like that. Not from anyone."

"Oh? How do you know?"

"A kid of twelve? She knew the score. She was wary of people. There was this character on the—"

"It's you we're talking about. According to—" The Chief Inspector consulted a slip of paper "—Mr. Mark Summers, who runs the sub-post office by the park entrance, you bought a slab of chocolate just like this yesterday afternoon."

"So I did. I was going to—"

"And then went off with it in the direction of the park. Without your dog."

"Does that prove anything?"

"It suggests a thing or two. From the state of the body—Susan's body—it appears she was killed sometime yesterday afternoon. You were there in the afternoon. You've said so."

"I never said I clapped eyes on her."

The Chief Inspector mused. Suddenly he said, "Why did you take your dog for a walk this morning?"

"I always do."

"At six o'clock?"

"I'd had a dodgy night. Wanted to clear my head."

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"What gave you a dodgy night?"

"Indigestion, maybe. The chocolate."

"You're saying you ate it yourself?"

"I'm telling you what happened. I can't do more."

"I think you can, Mr. Owen. I believe you can give us a full account of events."

"Look. Why don't you trace this bloke I saw loitering in the kids' playground? Susan saw him, too. She pointed him out. He scared her."

Adams surveyed him. "When was it you spotted this man?"

"Yesterday afternoon. I was coming in here to report it."

"What stopped you?"

"My sister said she'd do it today."

"So you were happy to leave it to her?"

"She said she might call in." Mike rumpled the furry dome of the spaniel, who looked up at him hopefully, scenting depature.

"Why didn't you do it yourself, on your walk this morning?"

"It didn't occur to me."

"Other things on your mind, maybe. Like revisiting the park?"

"I never went near the park."

"You did this afternoon."

"Is there some law against it?"

Chief Inspector Adams sat on the desk-edge to observe him. A thin-faced, worried-looking man, he sounded angry. Subterranean volcanic mutterings were impeding the surface equability of his approach.

He spoke slowly and distinctly. "You hadn't taken your dog to the park for some days. Why choose this afternoon to get back into the habit?"

Mike sat silently for a while.

"I'd heard something," he said finally, "on the radio. Something about a missing girl."

"What difference would that have made?"

"Perhaps I—" Mike stumbled, stuttered. "Perhaps she'd have been there. Susan, I mean. Coming home from school, through the park. I might have spotted her. Then I'd have known it wasn't her that was missing."

"What made you think it might have been?"

"I wanted to be certain." Mike hiccuped. "Pardon me." Belatedly he put a hand to his mouth. Adams watched it stonily.

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"You've already said you took the perimeter path for the express purpose of avoiding the children who were in the park. If Susan—"

"I might still have managed to spot her, from a distance." Mike shook his head, intending to stop it again almost immediately, but for some reason he couldn't. Without voluntary effort on his part, his head went on shaking: there seemed little he could do to bring it to rest. "I had Shimmy to think of," he added, with difficulty.

"You did, indeed. Why did you let her explore that clump of undergrowth?"

"She just went."

"And made the discovery. The discovery you wanted her to make. So that then, Mr. Owen, you could come along here, report finding the body, act out the part of the concerned citizen doing his public-spirited—"

"I *was* concerned," Mike said simply. "I *am*. Why don't you want to believe me, Inspector?"

The assistant glanced up from his notetaking. For a few moments they both stared at him. Adams seemed nonplussed, and no less angry. Presently he levered himself convulsively away from the desk and signaled to his subordinate.

"Is the dog all right?" he asked Mike abruptly.

"What do you mean?"

"It's been here a good while. And it may be a long time yet before we—"

A telephone rang. Snatching it up, Adams listened impassively, said, "Right, I'll be along," and put it down. As if there had been no interruption, he went on, "If you like, we can ask your sister to step round here and take the animal—"

"If it's all the same to you, I'd sooner she stayed." Mike fondled Shimmy behind an ear. The dog rubbed her jowl against the back of his hand, pleaded with burnt-amber eyes. "Getting peckish, are you?" he inquired softly. "Past your dinnertime. We'll make it up to you later."

"I might be able to rustle up a dog-biscuit," Adams said stolidly. He and the other man left the room.

It was quiet inside the building. The clash of a door was a rarity. A multiple tread of feet along the corridor, which occurred once, seemed to have been condoned by accident: an unaccountable shudder within lubricated parts. Mike had known noisier hospitals. He glanced around the room. Brightly decorated, it possessed a solitary four-paned window set so near the ceiling that, from where he sat,

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a mere segment of greyish sky could be seen. The time by the digital wall-clock was eight twenty-three. Another half hour or so of daylight remaining.

The Chief Inspector's desk bore nothing except the telephone and what looked like a computer terminal. Nowhere was there anything to read. The atmosphere was on the stuffy side.

At his feet, Shimmy began to pant a little. Mike caressed her again and she rolled on her back, hind legs elevated to present a pink-fleshed stomach for attention. "Sorry, old girl," he murmured, tickling her. "Not the normal end to the walk, is it? Afraid we've landed ourselves. Keep your paws crossed."

An hour later, it was almost dark inside the room. Shimmy's tongue lolled; she looked forlorn. Mike went timidly to the door, opened it, glanced along the corridor to meet the eye of a uniformed constable stationed against the wall.

"It's my dog," he explained. "She's getting rather thirsty. Would it be possible—?"

"I'll see what I can do, sir."

The constable made no move. Shutting the door, Mike reclaimed his seat by the desk. A slight feeling of sickness was invading his abdomen. He hoped it would pass. If he had to make a bolt for the washroom, Shimmy would get fussed. Was there a washroom?

Twenty minutes later, the constable entered with a yellow plastic bowl of water. Shimmy lapped endlessly. Mike said, "Thank you very much. I'm so grateful. Perhaps you can tell me—"

"Chief'll be with you shortly, sir."

The constable withdrew, closing the door firmly and soundlessly. Her thirst slaked, the spaniel took a restive turn or two about the room, sniffed at a waste bin, returned to Mike, and jumped up to place her forelegs on his lap, nuzzling his nose with her own. Presently she cocked her head and said, "Woof?"

"Don't ask me," Mike told her.

Half an hour limped by.

Again Mike went to the door. The constable was no longer there. Rubbing his jaw, Mike walked Shimmy to the swing doors at the end of the corridor and peered through the glazed section. All he could see was a landing and the head of some stairs. The dog scratched impatiently at the varnished woodwork.

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For the thirtieth time, Mike said, "I know, old girl. I'm sorry. Nothing I can do about it. Try to stick it out."

Disconsolately, she accompanied him back to the room. The dent he had made in the chair accepted him once more. The place now was indisputably hot and airless, making it hard to think clearly. A sudden vision of Beth flashed across his mind. He supposed he could have telephoned her. Would they have allowed that?

The door opened with a rattle, startling him. Shimmy let out a yip of suspicion. Glancing down at her, Chief Inspector Adams said brusquely, "I forgot about the dog-biscuit. Better get along with her, Mr. Owen. Give her a bite to eat."

He came uncertainly to his feet. "Where shall I take her?"

"What's wrong with home?"

"Home?"

"That's right." The tone was casual, though brisk. "We've been in touch with your sister. She's expecting you."

"You'll want to—" Mike's voice quavered, vanished. Clearing his throat, he tried again. "You'll be needing to see me again?"

"Let's hope not, shall we?" The Chief Inspector's near-smile seemed as genuine as it was capable of being. "I'm sure you won't be wanting to repeat an experience like this."

"What's the position, then?" The tremor persisted, but he had to know.

Adams scowled across the room. Mike thought he had taken offense, until he saw that the detective was in fact thinking deeply about his reply. At last it came. "There's been a development."

"Yes?"

"The young man you spoke of. The one in the playground—"

"Did you find him?"

"No." The Chief Inspector examined his fingernails before glancing up. "He found us."

Mike waited dumbly. On a reflective key, Adams continued, "You were quite right. He's been knocking around there for some while, staying clear of people. His parents think he's on a building site the other side of town, but actually he's out of a job. He doesn't want them to know. Touchy type."

"And he'd seen Susan?"

"Oh, yes. Noticed her with you, a couple of times. You and the dog." With a touch of benevolence, Adams bent his gaze briefly upon Shimmy, seated in hunchbacked apathy on the floor at their feet. "That king-sized lead of yours rather took his fancy."

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"So?" prompted Mike, as the Chief Inspector paused.

"Yesterday afternoon he saw you come through the park—unaccompanied. Not long after that, he spotted Susan."

Mike's hands clenched. "What happened?"

"So far as he was concerned, nothing."

Adams surveyed him blandly. Mike said in bewilderment, "But he came forward, you said. Wasn't it to confess—?"

"The reason he approached us was to supply details of the person Susan was with."

"Who?"

"A highly respectable-looking gentleman. Bowler hat, City suit: the works. He and the girl were strolling along together, chatting."

The Chief Inspector leaned tiredly against the desk. "It wasn't the first time the young man had noticed the pair of them. They'd come through the park together the previous morning, too."

Mike stared blindly at the digital clock. "I know the man you're talking about. I've seen him."

"Yes, and he'd seen you."

"The first time I ran into Susan—"

"In fact, he did his best to chuck the blame on to you."

"Blame?"

"He's been interviewed. That's what took us so long."

The room spun around Mike. To steady things up, he crouched and placed a hand upon the supportive back of Shimmy, who blinked soulfully. In a low voice he asked, "How did you know where to find him?"

Unexpectedly, Adams chuckled. "Investigative brilliance. That's what I'd like to be able to say. Truth is, though, the young man knew where he lived. He comes from the street next to his. So—" He flipped a hand. "We sent somebody round, and there he was."

"And he admitted—?"

"As I say, for a while he tried to cast you as the culprit. But luckily we had a shred or two of evidence. We found a half a slab of fruit-and-nut chocolate inside his briefcase: it matched exactly the piece found near the—Susan's body. Also there were bloodstains on a pair of his trousers stuffed into a wardrobe. A spot of verbal encouragement on our part did the rest. We've a full confession."

Mike slid his palm to the base of Shimmy's spine, patted the sturdy softness once or twice. He could think of nothing constructive to say. He was out of ideas. The Chief Inspector looked a little dashed. "It seems," he went on presently, "that a handy piece of dead branch

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was used to—subdue the child. As frequently happens, once he'd started, he lost his head. When he saw what—"

"I don't want to hear any more," Mike said hoarsely. "I'd prefer not."

"Can't say I blame you." A flash of kindness lent warmth to the remark. "The thing that concerns you, Mr. Owen, is that you're in the clear. Sorry we had to keep you so many hours, but that's the way it is. Now why don't you get off home?"

All the way back, Shimmy pulled strenuously, panting and wheezing in her eagerness to recapture routine. Mike handled her mechanically. He was barely aware of his surroundings. The evening had turned fine and warm, bringing out scents from the damp greenery. In the dusk, somebody passed him and said, "Hi, Mr. Owen. Hauled you out for a nightcap, has she?" He contrived some gibberish in reply. A car went past, driven raucously: some youngster on urban safari. From an open window spilled a sequence of familiar introductory chords. *News at Ten* was about to commence.

Beth was ironing in the kitchen. Intent on a garment, she said, "I kept something hot for you. It's in the top oven. There wasn't—"

"I can't eat just at the moment. Sorry if it's spoiled."

"I had to improvise. Didn't know what was happening, when you might be back." She turned and looked at him, meeting his eyes for a third of a second, chewing her lower lip in the way that Mike recalled from their childhood. Glancing away, she restored her attention to the blouse she was pressing. "You can have it later."

"Shimmy's ravenous."

"She doesn't need anything this time of night." Turning to the refrigerator, Beth took out the dog's bowl containing a few scraps and set it down under the table. Shimmy threw herself upon the mixture. For a moment Mike watched her, smiling faintly. He had lowered himself onto the stool that stood near the door. Holding up the blouse for critical inspection, Beth added, "If anybody wants my opinion, it's high time they brought back hanging."

Mike studied the cooker. He said nothing.

"If I were the wife of that man," Beth proceeded, biffing the blouse into neat folds, "which God forbid, I'd do the job myself. Put an end to him. That's if he hadn't had the guts or decency to save anyone else the trouble."

The blouse went onto the completed heap. "In my estimation, anybody who could do that to a defenseless child—or even consider

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the possibility of doing it, which is every bit as evil—should be expected to take his own life as a matter of course. He's forfeited his right to existence."

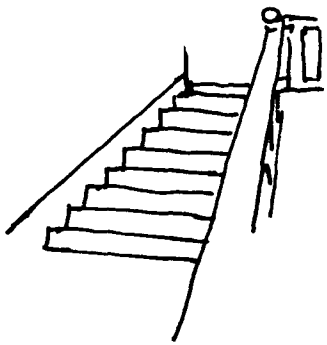
Seizing a skirt, she draped it across the ironing board, traced the wreckage of a pleat with her fingers. "It's the only way to atone."

Mike rose from the stool. "I think," he said, "I'll be getting along to bed. It's been a hectic sort of day." In the doorway he paused, looked back at the dog who was licking the bowl to a shine. " 'Night, Shimmy," he said.

Beth ironed for another twenty minutes until she had finished. Then she heated a little milk for her bedtime drink. While she stood waiting for bubbles to appear, Shimmy sat up sharply in her basket and uttered a short, shrill bark, ending in a howl. Beth's fingers tightened on the saucepan handle. After some hesitation, she switched off the burner, removed her apron, went out to the hall. The house was silent. Mounting the stairs slowly, she rapped on her brother's door.

"Michael? Did you call out?"

When she tried to open the door, she met resistance. A resolute woman, she persevered until she had created a space wide enough to show her the figure sprawled across the floor, the blood still seeping from the wrists into the drenched carpet. Nearby lay the razorblade. Having taken stock, she reclosed the door carefully, returned downstairs, and lifted the telephone receiver. Before dialing, she checked that she had the right number for the police station. She had never liked doing things in a rush.



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a *NEW* Black Widowers story by

ISAAC ASIMOV

Black Widowers story #54!—about a puzzling incident in a building on Sixth Avenue in Manhattan just north of Fifty-fourth Street. And the incident described by Black Widowers guest W. Bradford Hume happened in real life, exactly as described, to our own Dr. Asimov . . . !

WHERE IS HE?

by ISAAC ASIMOV

When Roger Halsted introduced his guest as his investment broker, the members of the Black Widowers, assembled at their monthly banquet, responded at first with a stunned silence.

Halsted ignored that, and went about the room introducing the members methodically.

"As I said, this is W. Bradford Hume, folks. —Brad, I want you to meet Emmanuel Rubin, who writes mysteries; Mario Gonzalo, who will be doing your portrait soon; James Drake, who's coughing over his cigarette and was a chemist before he retired; Geoffrey Avalon, a patent attorney, though I've never found out what they do; and Thomas Trumbull, who works for a hush-hush branch of the government. —And this is our waiter, Henry, who's also a member and has just brought you your drink."

Hume acknowledged all the introductions with grace, and a smile. He took his martini with a "Thank you, Henry," and by that time the assemblage had recovered.

Rubin, his eyes wide behind his thick glasses, said, "Are you telling us this is *your* investment broker, Roger?"

"That's exactly what I'm telling you," said Halsted haughtily.

"Have they given you a raise in salary? Quintupled it?"

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Halsted said, "No need to assume I'm a beggar, Manny, just because I teach mathematics at a junior high school. I've got seniority, security, and a reasonable salary; neither rich nor gaudy, but reasonable. Besides, Alice works, too, and makes more than I do. And I have a small inheritance from my mother, rest her soul—so Brad takes care of a few bucks for me, and very well, too."

Hume smiled appreciatively and said, "Not that I'm trying to drum up business, gentlemen. It's my understanding that this is a purely social evening."

"Purely!" growled Trumbull.

Avalon cleared his throat. "I should think, Mr. Hume, that being a financial adviser in these unsettled times makes for a tense life."

"So it does, Mr. Avalon, but all times are unsettled, and that makes it particularly difficult for a financial adviser, since he's expected to see the future—the immediate future, at any rate."

"What stocks go up, what stocks go down?" murmured Gonzalo. He was already working at Hume's caricature and had put in the shock of dark hair under which he intended to hang an almost cherubic face.

"That, certainly," said Hume, "but a little more than that, too. We have to be able to judge what will be useful as a long-term investment, to anticipate changes in tax—"

At this point, Halsted put his hand on Hume's arm. "Don't talk about it now, Brad. They're going to grill you after the meal. Until then, you have a right to relax."

"That suits me," said Hume. "What's on the menu for tonight, or am I not supposed to ask?"

"Why shouldn't you ask?" said Halsted. "Henry, what's on?"

Henry's smooth, sixtyish face crinkled slightly. "There will be grilled salmon tonight, Mr. Halsted, and I think you'll find it most unusual. The lobster sauce is a private recipe of the chef's."

"Trying it out on us, is he?" said Drake in his hoarse voice.

"You will not be disappointed, Dr. Drake. It will be preceded by a Portuguese fish chowder, which you may find a bit spicy."

"That won't bother *me*," said Avalon, his bushy eyebrows hunching low and giving his face an amiably satanic look.

As it turned out, Henry was quite right. From soup through the rum chocolate cake, there were sounds of approval. Even Rubin's stout assertion that the "now-fashionable exercise of futurism" was empty of content didn't rouse much in the way of clamorous opposition.

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"All you have to do," said Rubin, "is to go back and read the predictions for the present time handed out by the charlatans of half a century ago. You'll find that they saw a million things that didn't happen and saw almost nothing of what *did* happen."

Hume listened gravely to the discussion that followed, but said nothing.

Gonzalo said, with obvious mischief in his eyes, "Your good friend Asimov is a futurist, isn't he?"

"Asimov?" said Rubin, every hair in his sparse beard seeming to bristle. "He describes the future in what he *calls* science fiction, but the only points he gets right are those that are painfully obvious to anyone. And I wouldn't call him my *friend*. I just help him with the plot of a story now and then, when he's stuck."

Halsted patted his stomach with a satisfied smile and tapped his water-glass with his spoon. "Gentlemen, it's time for Brad to pay for his excellent meal by facing a grilling. Manny, since you have so low an opinion of futurism, would you serve as grill-master? And please remember to maintain an elementary level of courtesy to one who is our honored guest."

Rubin snorted. "I'll let you know, Roger, when I need lessons in manners. —Mr. Hume, how do you justify your existence?"

"If you expect me to say," said Hume, "that I justify it by making people rich through clever investments, you'll be disappointed. The justification comes from my skill as an after-dinner speaker."

"It does, does it? I take it you consider yourself good at it?"

"Yes, I do. I've been doing it for fifteen years and by now I've reached a routine fee of $7,500 for an hour talk. I think that's an adequate measure of my skill."

"Huh," said Rubin, seeing no immediate opportunity for a riposte, "why do you bother doing anything else?"

Hume shrugged. "I don't particularly like to travel, so I want to be in a position to be able to pick and choose; to turn down any talk, regardless of fee. I can do that best if I have a regular job as a financial cushion. And that's why I don't have an agent. They put pressure on you—and they take thirty percent."

Rubin said, "If you don't have an agent, how do you get speaking engagements?"

"Word of mouth. If you can give a good talk, the world will beat a path to your door."

"What's your subject?"

"Futurism, Mr. Rubin—which, you don't think much of. Despite

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your comments on the subject, everyone seems interested these days in what the future holds. What's the future of education? Of robots? Of international relations? Of space exploration? You name it—they're interested."

"And you speak on all of that?"

"I do."

"How many different talks do you have prepared?"

"None. If I had to prepare my talks, I'd have to neglect my brokerage work, and I can't do that. I speak extemporaneously and I don't need preparation. Call out your subject and I'll stand up and talk for an hour—but you'll have to pay me my fee."

Halsted said, "Listen, I've heard him speak. He *is* good."

Gonzalo said, "Have you had any funny experiences in your speaking career, Mr. Hume?"

"Funny?" said Hume, leaning back in his chair, completely comfortable. "I've had some memorable introductions, which I *didn't* think were funny, though others might laugh. I once had someone object to my fee and write me a letter saying it was four times as much as they had ever paid anyone. I wrote back and said, 'I'm four times as good—at least.' In introducing me, he read the correspondence, and the audience—a professional engineers' organization—suddenly realized they were being soaked four times the usual by an arrogant bum. I could feel the north wind blow as I rose—it took me half the talk to win them over.

"Another time, a woman introduced me in a thoroughly pedestrian way—which I'm used to. Mild applause came, and I rose in order to begin right after it had peaked so that I could start with the audience's self-hypnosis in my favor. Except that the woman who introduced me—and may she have a special place in hell someday—began to call out to latecomers that there were seats on the side. She kept it up till the applause died, and I had to rise and address a dead audience. I never did quite liven them up.

"Then there's the funny man. I had one give a fifteen-minute talk as an introduction. Fifteen minutes! I timed it on my watch. And he was funny, *really* funny. He had the audience rolling and he wasn't charging a penny. I had to follow him, and I knew the audience was going to consider me far less funny—and at an exorbitant price. I was considering forfeiting the money and leaving when my introducer concluded by saying, 'But don't let me give you the impression that Mr. Hume can do *anything*. I happen to know he

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has never sung the role of the Duke in *Rigoletto*,' and sat down to loud laughter.

"What he didn't know was that he had handed it to me on a plate. I got up, waited for the routine applause to die all the way down, and in the dead silence I belted out in my best tenor voice, 'Bella figlia dell'amore,' the first notes of the Duke's contribution to the famous Quartet. The audience rocked with the loudest laugh of the evening, and I *had* them.

"I had to give a talk twelve hours before I had a heart attack, and then another twelve hours after the attack. Fortunately, I didn't know it was a heart attack at the time. The second talk was to a bunch of cardiologists, and not one of them—"

Gonzalo said, "Hold on for a minute. *Hold on!*"

Hume rather skidded to a halt and looked surprised. "I beg your pardon?"

Gonzalo said, "I *believe* you when you say you can speak for an hour extemporaneously without notice, but you didn't get my question."

"You asked me if I had had any funny experiences, didn't you?"

"Yes, but I didn't mean funny humorous. I meant funny odd or puzzling. I meant *funny.*"

Hume rubbed his nose and said, "Could you explain that at greater depth, Mr. Gonzalo?"

"I meant something you couldn't explain. A puzzle. A *mystery.*"

Avalon brought the palm of his hand down on the table with a loud slap. "Mario, I move we eject you from membership."

"You can't," said Gonzalo angrily. "There are no restrictions on the questions we ask."

"Except the canons of good taste, for heaven's sake."

"What's in bad taste about asking for a mystery? I like mysteries. If he doesn't have any, he can say so." Mario turned to Hume, frowning, and in a distinctly self-righteous voice said, "Well, have you experienced any kind of mystery in connection with your speaking engagements?"

Hume was smiling delightedly. "Well, yes, as a matter of fact, I have! How odd that you should ask. It was years ago, but it was a real mystery. We didn't have the slightest idea where the fellow had gone. —Do you want to hear it?"

Gonzalo rose from his seat and said, "*I* do, but I'll be glad to put it to a vote. Is there anyone here who *doesn't* want to hear it?"

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There wasn't a sound, and then Avalon said, "Well, Mario, we'll listen."

Gonzalo nodded his head emphatically. "All right, then. Mr. Hume, you have the floor."

Hume said mildly, "I'll be glad to. But are you going to stop me midway, or will I be allowed to talk freely?"

Avalon said, "I assure you, Mr. Hume, you will be allowed to talk. Roger as host will have absolute control over the conversation and when he sayeth 'Speak,' we will speak, and when he sayeth 'Speak not,' we will remain silent. —Right, Roger?"

"Right," said Halsted.

"I will begin," said Hume, "and take my chance."

The story begins [said Hume] some years ago when I was invited to give a talk in Seattle. It meant I would have to fly, obviously, and I'm not keen on flying. I never do it voluntarily; certainly not in January. What's more, the fee offered was considerably less than I liked. So, to put it all into one tightly crumpled ball, I said no.

And it was a good thing I said no, because as it happened the Northwest was visited by a tenacious fog on just the day I would have arrived. Even assuming I would have landed safely, very few planes left Seattle for a week thereafter and I would have been stranded. That would have annoyed me, since I had work to do at home—and it would have annoyed my employer, too. The firm doesn't mind my speaking, since I generally give it a plug or two and it looks good for them to be concerned with, and involved in, the future. Still, my staying away a week would have been pushing it a little far.

All that is irrelevant, however. The important thing is that the gentlemen at the other end didn't accept my no. They took advantage of the miracle of modern communication and came back at me with the suggestion that I stay right in New York and submit to a twenty-minute interview on television. The interview would be taped and eventually played for a presumably eager audience in Seattle.

The fee was still less than I would have liked, but I was flattered at their persistence. Then, too, I wouldn't have to travel. The interview would take place at a midtown location within walking distance of my apartment, if the weather were passable, which is, of course, by no means a foregone conclusion in Manhattan in December. Anyway, I accepted.

The gentleman inviting me—I forget his name, but that's im-

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material, I'll call him Smith—sensed a residuum of unenthusiasm about me and tried to reassure me that all would be made as simple as possible for me. He told me he would come and pick me up in a taxi at 9:20 A.M. in order to get me there at 9:30—the cameraman, scheduled to get there shortly after 9:00 A.M., would be all set up and ready when I arrived.

That was an important point to me. I'd done television work—cameras being set up for an interview in some hotel room, for instance—and let me tell you, there's no easier way to be driven crazy. Television has been around for forty years and the cameramen still haven't worked out a system for setting up lights in such a way that the subject is well illuminated and with no distracting shadows.

Besides, they all consider themselves artists and there's some sort of law, apparently, that compels artists never to be satisfied. Every adjustment here throws out something there. It takes hours for them to reach a point of near-satisfaction, and then when you sit down they become aware for the first time that you wear glasses, and that the glasses cast an undesirable reflection—and so all the weary work must be gone through again.

I said, "Are you sure the cameraman will be ready, that all I'll have to do will be to sit down?"

"Positive," he said, and that swung it.

Came the day. Smith pulled up in his taxi on time and off we went. We arrived at the proper place within ten minutes, and as we went up Smith said to me, "He'll be all ready for us."

I tried not to let my cynicism show. I'm convinced that cameramen are not ready for anything at any time for anyone. "Fine," I said.

We got off the elevator at one of the upper floors and swung into the office just before 9:30 A.M. We had entered the offices of quite a large law firm, in which an old Army buddy of Smith's was a senior partner. Let's call him Jones, because I don't remember his name, either. They were lending us the use of a conference room.

Smith said jovially to the receptionist, "Hello, I'm Smith and this is Mr. Hume. We're here for the television taping. I suppose the cameraman has arrived and is set up."

The receptionist said, rather indifferently, "I didn't see any cameraman, sir."

"What? No cameraman?"

"No, sir."

Smith frowned but decided to be invincibly optimistic. "It can't be," he said. "He's waiting for us."

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But he wasn't. We walked into the conference room and it was as bare as a Shakespearean stage.

"Where is he?" I asked.

"I don't know," said Smith.

Down came Smith's buddy, Jones, who shook hands with me and said to Smith, "Well, where is he?"

"I don't know," said Smith again.

I said, "Better call his office."

Smith said, "His office is in Indianapolis."

Whereupon I said, rather nonplussed, "Aren't there any cameramen in New York? Why send in one from Indianapolis?"

Smith shrugged. "It's a firm we always work with."

Jones pointed to a telephone in the corner. He said to Smith, "Push any button at the bottom that's not lit up, then push eight and wait for another dial-tone, then push the area code and the number."

I waited patiently. It's an amazing thing. Usually, the one thing that brings out the fury in me is tardiness. All sorts of things can go wrong and I'm patience itself. Everyone remarks on what a sweet fellow I am. But if someone doesn't appear at the agreed-upon instant, a frown creases my brow. Let five minutes pass and smoke is curling out of my ears. But time was passing and it was almost the moment at which I was counting on having *finished* the interview and the cameraman hadn't even showed up—and I wasn't in the least perturbed. There was a mystery here, and I was interested.

Smith had returned from the telephone. "He left yesterday," he said, "and the manager says he had the right name, the right address, and everything was as it should be. What's more, the manager says the cameraman assigned to us is known as 'Old Reliable.' He's worked all over the world and he never misses an appointment."

I said, "He's missed this one. Where's he supposed to be today, then, if he left yesterday?"

"At a hotel," said Smith.

"Did he ever get there?" I asked.

It was back to the telephone, and after a while Smith hung up and said, "He registered last night."

Jones said, "All right, then. He took a taxi from the hotel and the driver spotted him for an out-of-towner and took him to this place by way of Yonkers. Taxi drivers have been known to do that."

"That's impossible," said Smith with intense irritation. "He's staying at the New York Hilton. Isn't that right in the neighborhood?"

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"The Hilton?" Jones sounded perplexed. "Yes, it is. It's right across the street. All he has to do is cross Fifty-fourth Street."

"Yes. So he wouldn't take a taxi, would he?"

"I guess not. The hotel's address is thirteen thirty-five Sixth and we're at thirteen forty-five Sixth. The biggest greenhorn in the world wouldn't take a taxi to go ten numbers along a particular street, and this guy is a world traveler they call Old Reliable."

I felt my old cynicism rising as high as my nostrils and said, "So Old Reliable is here in the big city. He went on a toot last night, brought home an amiable young woman, and is now sleeping it off."

Smith looked indignant. "Come on, the manager said he's forty-eight years old. He's no wild kid."

"He's no dead hulk, either," I said. "I'm older than he is and I could do it easily. I mean, I don't, but I could if I wanted to."

"Well, he wouldn't do it if he had a date to keep in the morning. He's a professional man."

"All right," I said. "You're talking me into wondering if he didn't have a heart attack in the night, if he might not be lying in that hotel bed right now dying, or maybe dead."

Smith and Jones both looked uneasy. Smith said uncertainly, "Do you think we ought to call the police?"

Jones said, "Not before we have someone look into his room."

Jones picked up the phone this time. He spoke crisply into it, then hung up. We all maintained a worried silence for a while.

Smith said, "Do you suppose he came to this building and couldn't get in? I imagine the security is tight. He may be down in the lobby right now."

"Security is tight, sure," said Jones, "but a pass was delivered to him last night. He should have had no trouble getting in."

"Maybe it never got to him," I said, ever the pessimist, "and he never got past the lobby."

Jones said, "I'll send someone down to look."

By that time the phone was ringing. Jones answered it, talked a while, and came back to say, "Hotel security went into his room. His baggage is there, but he isn't. And there's no camera equipment. So he left with his cameras."

"Then where is he?" I asked.

Jones thought a while and said, "I suppose they looked in the bathroom."

Smith shrugged. "I assume the security people know their business."

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By now I'd been there nearly an hour and word came up that there was no sign of any cameraman wandering about the lobby. Obviously if he were carrying camera equipment about with him, he would be easily spotted. For that matter, the security men downstairs hadn't seen anyone with such equipment come in, with or without a pass.

Smith said, "You don't suppose he got off the elevator on the wrong floor, do you? He couldn't be lost somewhere in the building?"

Jones looked at his watch. "He was due here an hour and a half ago. How could he be lost for an hour and a half? There's not a floor in the building that doesn't have security guards. No one would be allowed to wander about anywhere. —And he wouldn't, anyway. He'd ask. After all, he knew the name of this firm. For that matter, he knew the correct floor."

There was a sticky silence and we all took turns looking at our watches. Finally, Jones muttered an "Excuse me" and left. He was back in three minutes and said, "I just talked to Josie—"

"Josie?" I asked.

"The receptionist. She swears no cameraman came in. In fact, no one—*no one*—came in who isn't a member of the firm except you, Smith, and you, Mr. Hume."

Smith said, "Was she at her desk the whole time?"

"She insists she was."

"You mean she didn't go out to powder her nose or whatever?"

"She says she was on the job and alert all morning, she says no one could possibly have gotten into the place without her seeing him."

I said, "Is she a truthful woman?"

Jones frowned at me. "We can trust her. She's been on the job nearly five years now and if she says no one got in, no one got in."

Smith said, "Then where is he? How could he have gotten lost just crossing the street?"

I said, "We're eliminating everything except the possibility that he might have had an accident crossing the street."

Smith said shakily, "You mean he might have been hit by a car?"

"It's been known to happen," I said.

"It would have to be pretty serious," said Jones. "Being a professional, he'd call us or the home office. Even if he were immobilized, he'd tell someone to call us."

I said, "If he were conscious. If he were alive."

Jones said, "If it was a really serious accident in the street just outside, they'd know about it downstairs."

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I said, "Did anyone ask?"

Jones hesitated about two seconds and called downstairs. It didn't take long. He shook his head. "No one down there knows anything about any accident."

Smith said, "Call the police. They'd have a record."

Jones didn't seem to want to, but he did. That took longer, but the result was the same. He said, "The police say there is no record of any accident at any time this morning at Fifty-fourth Street and Sixth Avenue."

Smith said, "Then where is he?"

I got up. "Gentlemen," I said, "I don't know where he is, but I can wait no longer. I've got other appointments to meet, other work to do. I'm terribly sorry, but I have to leave. Still, I'd like to know the answer to this. If at any time you find out, please phone me. If you're kind enough to do this, I'll come back a second time to complete the taping."

So I left. —Within an hour, Smith did call me and explained the situation. A week later, I returned and did the job. There's your mystery.

The Black Widowers stared dubiously at their guest. Halsted spoke for all, finally, when he said, "Did that really happen, Brad? Or are you having a bit of fun with us?"

"No, no," said Hume. "It's all true. Every word. Scout's honor. It happened exactly as I described it."

"Well, then, tell us what happened to the cameraman."

Hume shook his head, still smiling. "You wanted a mystery and I gave it to you. You tell *me* what happened. You have all the facts. I'll give you two hints. No one was lying. It wasn't a setup of any kind. The second hint is that it's no tragedy. The cameraman was in no way harmed."

Gonzalo said, "Did he have a temporary bout of amnesia and go wandering off?"

Hume said, "No, he was in no way harmed, physically or mentally."

"See here," said Avalon rather heavily, "you don't really know for certain he was in the hotel at all—or in New York, even. No one saw him there that morning. The pass was sent over the night before, but I'll bet it was just left at the desk for him. Who knows *who* might have been in the room?"

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Hume said, "It was someone who signed the cameraman's name in the register."

"Anyone could do that if he knew the name," said Avalon. "The cameraman had a reservation at the hotel and someone knew of it. The someone delayed the cameraman somehow, registered in his name, and had a room for a night at a posh hotel at someone else's expense. Hotel service found baggage there in the morning, when our imposter had gone about his own business, but no camera equipment. That might just mean that there was no camera equipment in the first place."

Hume said, "Why should anyone do that?"

Avalon said, "I don't know. I could invent motives by the score, but I couldn't prove any of them."

Trumbull said, "Someone on the run needed a false name and a secure room just for the night. A spy."

Drake said, in a tone that showed clearly he was not serious, "A terrorist. He needed a room in which to plant a bomb."

"Gentlemen," said Hume, "you *are* inventing things. As a matter of fact, it never occurred to us to locate the bellhop who took the cameraman's baggage to the room, but if we had, that bellhop would have told us he had brought up some items that looked as though they might be camera equipment. No, it's absolutely certain that the right man registered at the hotel."

"In that case," said Rubin, "he was up to funny stuff. He had a girl he had to see, some money matter to attend to, something or other in the great city he wanted to do. When he got down to the lobby of the hotel, he checked his equipment, grabbed a taxi, and dashed off. Maybe he thought he'd be back in half an hour and that you'd wait that long for him without much fuss. But perhaps it took two hours, because he underestimated New York traffic or got into a minor tangle of some sort that delayed him."

Hume said, "I wouldn't think he'd do that. Surely a job would come first with Old Reliable."

There was a long, dank silence as every face furrowed and every pair of lips pursed themselves—or so it seemed to Hume until he noticed the exception.

He said, "Henry's smiling. —Henry, what are you grinning about?"

Henry said, "I beg your pardon, sir. I mean no disrespect, but you did say it was no tragedy, and it occurs to me that it was a farce and so I can't help but smile."

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Avalon said, "Do you have a solution, Henry? If so, out with it."

Henry said, "If I have your permission, gentlemen?"

The chorus was immediate and unanimous.

Henry said, "Mr. Hume made it clear that the cameraman was a reliable professional who had worked all over the world and who had presumably always given satisfaction. Since he wasn't found dead in the room, and the police had no report of any accident, we can only assume that in the morning he had gotten ready to do his work, had crossed the street to the office building as he had been instructed to do, and, going to the proper place, had set up his television equipment."

"No," said Avalon. "The receptionist swears he never came in and Mr. Hume has told us the receptionist didn't lie. That means— Mr. Hume, please forgive me the question I am forced to ask. It is merely a matter of the search for a solution. When you told us that no one lied, may I take it that includes you?"

"I did not lie," said Hume with equanimity.

"In that case, Henry," said Avalon, "your assumption is wrong."

"Perhaps not, Mr. Avalon," said Henry. "Mr. Hume was supposed to arrive at nine-thirty A.M. and the cameraman was supposed to come at about nine A.M. in order to be ready by nine-thirty. Isn't that right, Mr. Hume?"

"That's right."

"And the receptionist would have been a very curious receptionist if she had arrived much before nine A.M., which would be the opening of the business day. The cameraman, however, was so reliable, efficient, and professional that it's quite likely he arrived earlier than nine A.M. That would account for the fact that the receptionist never saw him. What's more, I suspect a new shift came on in the lobby at nine and that's why no one down there later saw him come in.

"And the door would have been locked," said Avalon, "and he would have had to wait for her."

"Would he, sir? It was a large legal firm, we were told, so there would be many lawyers working there. At least one would have been at work early. He would answer the door, see the cameraman's pass, let him in, go back to his own work, and forget the whole thing.

Avalon said, "And what happened to the cameraman thereafter? Did he drop through a hole in the floor? No one saw him."

"Mr. Hume," said Henry, "may I ask you one more question?"

"Go ahead, Henry."

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"Considering that it was a large legal firm, did it possess more than one conference room?"

Hume leaned his head back and laughed in sheer enjoyment. "Two, it turned out, Henry. Two!"

"I thought so," said Henry. "The lawyer who let him in took him to the wrong conference room. The cameraman waited in one and you waited in the other the whole morning, and neither knew where the other was."

"No!" said Avalon. "How would that be possible? Wouldn't the cameraman come out and say, 'Where *is* everybody?' "

"In a way he did," said Hume. "He used the phone in his room to call Jones. Jones's secretary answered and said that Jones was away from his desk—which he was, being down in our conference room, wondering where the cameraman was. The cameraman said he had to tape someone and the secretary said she would tell Jones just as soon as he returned. Only Jones didn't return until after I had left. —How did you get it, Henry?"

"In the usual way," said Henry. "Once you and the other two gentlemen in the conference room, and my fellow members of the Black Widowers, too, had cut away all the complexity, the only thing left was something very simple. I just pointed it out."

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a *NEW* short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

The same week we read this story, we happened to read Kay Larson's New York *magazine review of the Francis Bacon retrospective at London's Tate Gallery. "Thwarted desire is the century's great leitmotiv," she wrote, and "Bacon established early on his claim for the vulnerability of the flesh." This observation seems relevant in presenting this strange tale about three perverse and sensually driven people, cruel and cruelly thwarted in their desires . . .*

THE PRIZE IN THE PACK

by WILLIAM BANKIER

Here was Casey Dolan trying to prepare his six o'clock sports broadcast and there was Carmen's big brother Alvin, waiting for her to finish work and giving Dolan the evil eye from the outer office.

Clement Foy's sonorous voice poured out of the monitor speaker. "A reminder that in fifteen minutes the old catcher will be along with your early-evening sports show. In the meantime, more rolling-home music here on CBAY, the voice of Baytown, as Les Brown and the Band of Renown offer some musical reassurance, 'I've Got My Love To Keep Me Warm.' "

Foy was stuck in the big-band era, which Dolan could stand. At forty-eight, he was five years older than the program director and he liked the bouncy sound. His two-finger typing of tonight's script rattled along almost in time with the rhythm. The age problem, if he had one, was in relation to Carmen Hopkins, who was only nineteen. This was a gap that had seemed unbridgeable six months ago when she came on staff. Now that they had made love, there turned

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out to be no gap. Dolan had been surprised and gratified, but soon learned he was exchanging the fear of inadequacy for that of an early death at the hands of big brother Alvin. He had always suspected there was a trace of Indian in the Hopkins genetic pool. Now those Iroquois eyes watched him from beyond the front desk. Did Alvin know? How could he know? Should Dolan give him a smile?

"I'm on my way," Carmen said, leaving her desk at the back of the room, passing Dolan's chair, letting her fingers brush the back of his neck. "Any problems with continuity, talk to my lawyer."

That was a laugh. In six months, she had mastered the job better than anybody the radio station had ever employed. She was good. Too good for such routine work, Dolan kept telling her. "You take it easy now, young lady," he said in an avuncular tone. It was the voice he had used when he was catching for the Redmen and a young pitcher needed reassurance out there on the mound.

"I always try," she said, riveting him with her mischievous stare, "though I don't always succeed." She swaggered away to join her brother. Dolan feasted his eyes on her. She still carried some baby-fat, he had discovered. Heart-shaped face, lips a bit on the heavy side but perfectly shaped, cheeks forever blushing. Her hair was glossy toffee, tied in twin braids with green ribbons. She had skin that drove Dolan mad, arms, legs, shoulders—she was packaged in this slightly textured, almost café-au-lait material and keeping his hands off it was for the over-the-hill but lately reborn athlete a severe exercise in self-discipline.

"Let's go, Carmen," Alvin said as he opened the door, towering over her, pretending to be out of patience with her instead of her slave, as even Dolan with his deteriorating vision could see. "I want to pick up some beer before the store closes."

"If you're getting drunk tonight," she said, "I'm going out."

Dolan got the message and the typewriter keys jammed. His heart was still pounding like a teenager's when he went on the air ten minutes later. "Good evening, sports fans. First place changed hands last night in the Baytown Fastball League as—"

After he signed off, Dolan drove home and showered and washed what was left of his hair. He was still using Anna's shampoo. A few drops was all he needed, so three months after his wife's departure for Centralia the big plastic bottle was holding out. The smell still reminded him of her. So did the bath itself, oddly and sadly. In early years, when David was still a baby, they sometimes performed what

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seemed in those days an adventurous act—they got into the shower together. Soaping each other, they laughed a lot and he called her his seal. Now—it seemed no more than a few weeks later—David was in charge of the science department at Centralia Polytechnic while his mother had opened a shop in the same city selling coordinated paints and wallpapers. And Dad was making it on his own.

Dolan rubbed himself dry with a rough towel. He faced the mirror at an angle that showed the least paunch, the fewest veins. Carmen seemed to like him. Mind you, it was always lights off and after a couple of drinks. He got dressed in the coordinated green-and-grey outfit, a modified track suit. The store manager had said he looked twenty years younger. Anna would laugh. She had forever been after Dolan to smarten himself up, buy new clothes. All she had to do to get her wish was leave him.

She hasn't really left me, Dolan said to himself as he pocketed money and keys and went outside into a balmy summer night. "After twenty-six years together, we're trying it apart. A little freedom, room to move."

He knew he'd find Carmen in the back lounge of the Coronet Hotel. It was her idea to conduct their meetings in the public eye. "If we sneak around and drive out to The Cedars like you're suggesting, somebody is bound to see us and say those two are up to something. But here in the heart of town, how bad can it be? We're fellow employees having a drink together."

"My problem will be keeping my hands off you," he said.

"I have the cure. Think of you touching me, and then Alvin walking in."

The blind jazz pianist was at the keyboard when Dolan entered the lounge. His dog lay at his feet, head down, barely tolerant of what was going on. Jack Danforth, owner of the Coronet, sat at the end of the bar. Dolan placed himself at a corner table, distributed a few waves, and ordered a large brandy-and-soda. He was halfway through it when Carmen appeared, spotted him, hugged the wall on her way to the table, and slipped furtively onto a chair.

"Are you all right?" he asked her.

"Do I look all right?"

He studied her face. It might have been called a swelling on the jaw. "There's no light in here. Have you been hit?"

The music climaxed, lots of applause, end of set. Pianist and seeing-eye dog filed out behind Danforth to sit in his office. Carmen

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was at her most rebellious, a sailor on leave. "I came so close to putting a knife in him, Casey—"

"Tell me."

"It's one thing when he nags me. That's what a big brother is for. But when he started in on Peter, I went for him."

"Calm down."

"All right. All right. Get me a beer."

He ordered a Molson and another brandy. The drinks came and they started in on them but she was still taking deep breaths through her nostrils. In this mood, she was more attractive than ever to Dolan.

"Did he know you were coming out to meet me?"

"No. I don't know. I don't care. Do you care?"

"I don't care."

"Stop worrying about my brother. I'm over eighteen, I can do whatever I want. There's not a damn thing Alvin can do about it."

Dolan tried to put from his mind thoughts of Alvin Hopkins doing something about it and then being punished for it by a life sentence, with Dolan no longer around to appreciate justice being done. "What made you so mad?" he asked.

"He said I'm not a responsible person. Without him to look after me, I'd go down the drain. He thinks I should still be at university."

Dolan thought so, too, but knew better than to tell the headstrong girl. She was a classic underachiever. Born with brains to spare and limitless energy, she refused ever to do more than just enough to get by. In Baytown High School, she got top grades while hardly cracking a book. Her brother Alvin, with no encouragement from Carmen, borrowed the money to pay for her first year in an arts course at Queen's University in Kingston, sixty miles down the road, past Centralia. He bullied her into registering and moving there and attending some lectures. But she only stayed three weeks, arriving back home on the bus, her trunk showing up, rail freight, a few days later.

The debacle cost Alvin a good part of the money he paid. And when his clever little sister got a job selling dresses at Artistic Ladies Wear, it was almost more than he could bear. The new job writing continuity (whatever *that* was) at CBAY was an improvement. But still she seemed more interested in going through the motions and having fun than in getting ahead. For a man who used all his limited ability to work his way up through the yards to a job behind a ticket

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window at the CN station, Carmen's behavior was calculated to drive him up the wall.

Dolan said to her, "What did he say about Pete?" Carmen Hopkins' other brother Peter, known to his friends as Hophead, had killed himself two years ago in a road accident involving his pickup truck and a steel power pylon.

"He said I'm not just bad for myself, I'm a bad influence on other people. That's a laugh. Pete was drunk when he showed up that night."

"I know."

"I couldn't ask him to stay. It was a girls' party. And he kept grabbing hold of people, it wasn't funny. Vera didn't like him and he kept grabbing hold of Vera."

Dolan had heard the story before. "So you ordered him out," he said gloomily.

"I whacked him and pushed him out the door and locked it. Then when I went after him, it was too late. He was driving away."

Dolan stared into the battered-baby eyes, hoping it was over. "Carmen," he said softly, "it was not your fault."

After a minute or so, she became calm. "You've had a normal life, eh, Case?" she said. "Good family. Lots of success."

"Yeah, sure." He gave her the grin that usually worked. "The only reason the Redmen kept old Casey Dolan behind the plate was I didn't mind being hit by bouncing baseballs." He took a drink. "And with our pitching, we had a lot of bouncing baseballs." He showed her his collection of broken fingers.

"It's a wonder you can type," she said.

"It explains a lot," he said.

They went off for a drive later, across the Bay Bridge and into the county. The windows were down and there was a lot of clover in the air. On the radio, Clem Foy was doing his night show, ignoring the musical tastes of his audience, playing a selection of 78s from his own library. He thanked Lionel Hampton for rendering "Midnight Sun," then introduced Louie singing "A Kiss To Build a Dream On."

As they approached the colored lights of a roadhouse, Carmen said she was hungry. Dolan drove in and parked in darkness on the farthest patch of gravel and went inside to get takeaway, leaving her in the car.

"That really cheeses me off," she said when he came back with

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hamburgers and shakes. He could feel the vibrations, so he switched on and got rolling again, heading farther into farmland. "You won't even take me inside," she complained with her mouth full. "I feel like some kind of cheap whore."

Half an hour later, he parked off the road on a headland with a view of the bay where it becomes part of Lake Ontario. Her mood was sweet again. Dolan kissed her, and his advancing years faded, leaving him feeling strong, not worried for the moment about anything. He knew it was only nature trying to get him to propagate the race, but he didn't care. Her mouth was soft, she smelled of soap and lipstick.

On the way home, she was buoyant. Her window was down, her eyes narrowed against the rush of air. "If you and I were married, there'd be no problem," she said. "Alvin would have to shut up."

"I'm already married. Did you forget?"

"She's left you. Get a divorce."

"What's the rush to get married? You're a kid, you've got your whole life. You're a talented girl, you can write up a storm. I'm just a stupid ballplayer but I can recognize what you've got."

"Here we go."

"You sit at that desk bashing out promotion announcements and program scripts with one brain tied behind your back. Work, damn it. Write." He glanced at her face, saw the down-turned mouth. "Develop the talent God gave you."

"Who asked Him?" she said. Then after half a mile of slipstream, she said, "Would you marry me if I said I was pregnant? I'm not, but if I told you I was?" She was smiling now. "You wouldn't believe me, would you?"

"Not in the nineteen-eighties." He shrugged. "I believed it in the fifties."

Carmen passed Dolan's desk one afternoon in the following week and dropped a sheaf of folded typewritten pages in front of him. "Read it and weep," she said and wandered away. He glanced at page one, saw "*Nor Iron Bars* by Carmen Hopkins." He was so excited by the manuscript, he couldn't get on with his work. He took it to the washroom and read it in the privacy of a cubicle.

She had written a story about a young girl in love with an older man. They both worked in a small-town radio station. There was practically no invention in it, the plot was his experience and hers,

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but it read like a house afire. At the end, the sports announcer was still with his wife and the girl was floating face-down in the bay.

He emerged into the office and went to her desk, where she was elaborately turning the pages of a newspaper. "Come for coffee," he said, handing her the manuscript.

"You like?" It was the only time she had appeared nervous in front of him.

"Come for coffee."

They went around the corner to the Paragon Cafe, where he ordered two coffees and the slab of cream pie she asked for. A kid. "Your story is brilliant," he said. "Exactly what I wanted you to do. Keep it up."

"What for?"

"Because you can."

"I tried it and now I know how easy it is. Big deal."

"You want to be infuriating, don't you? Who are you trying to provoke, your father?"

"The great prospector?" She laughed. "All he ever did was search for uranium that wasn't there and come back once in a while to get my mother pregnant."

"Succeed for yourself," Dolan pontificated. "Not for anybody else."

Carmen finished her pie, gave him the mischievous smile with her mouth half full. "I forget," she said. "Did you promise the other night to marry me if you got me pregnant?"

He knew she was teasing him, but his heart turned over anyway. "One of these days, kid—over my knee."

"Ready when you are," she said.

The Redmen were batting in the bottom of the third against the Napanee Oilers. The sun was setting behind the canning factory. Seated at the microphone in the press box under the grandstand roof, Dolan called the balls and strikes and kept up a flow of anecdote and description. He was feeling at peace with the world, almost smug, hoping management never discovered that he would broadcast baseball for nothing. In the bleachers, several hundred fans in shirtsleeves watched and ate and drank and yelled at the players and the umpires.

Around eight o'clock, Carmen made her way up the ladder and took a seat not far from Dolan. Perhaps to make her entry legal, she had put on her CBAY T-shirt. She was munching caramel corn

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from the famous narrow red box. When they cut back to the studio for a commercial, she extended the package in his direction.

"Thanks, I can't. Gets in my throat."

"Is it all right for me to be here?"

He looked at the scrubbed, healthy face, the glistening braids, the ripe body in a shirt one size too small. "It is absolutely perfect for you to be here." Then, encouraged by her glow, and just before his cue from the engineer, he said to her, "Carmen, dear, life is a box of Cracker Jack and you are the prize in the pack."

She stirred the air above her head with a finger. "Hoopdedoo!" she said.

After the game, they walked to his car in the parking lot behind the dance pavilion. The Clem Foy Five was playing inside, and through screened windows colored lights glowed behind the movement of dancing couples. They watched in silence, holding hands. It was a big regret for Dolan that he couldn't take the girl inside and hold her for a while to music. Now he drew her to him. She must have been reading his mind because she angled her cheek against his shoulder, rested her hand on his collar, pressed herself against him, and, moving hardly at all, unsteady on gravel, they danced part of a chorus of "Moonglow."

"Come here often?" she said to lighten the atmosphere. He said nothing, unlocked the car, let her in, slammed the door, and strode around to the driver's side. As he switched on, backed away, gunned a ferocious turn, and raced out of the fair grounds, she said, "You can come home with me tonight."

He said, "What?"

"Alvin has gone away for a few days. A friend of his called and asked him to go up to Montreal for some stag thing. A guy they know is getting married. He got on the train this afternoon."

Dolan drove in silence.

"On the other hand, if you don't want to— I just thought it would be nice to get in bed and not have to worry about rushing off."

He thought of what she had written. The young girl dead by her own hand. The possessive brother. The old athlete trying to squeeze a few more drops of flavor out of a desiccated life. She called it *Nor Iron Bars*. "I want to," he said as he made the turn to take them down the hill toward Station Street. "I just can't believe my luck." In his mind, cutting through the confusion, Dolan heard a sound that was not hard to identify. It was the door of a cage slamming shut behind him . . .

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Her house reminded Dolan of vacation cottages he had inhabited in wilderness country. It was of frame construction, ramshackle, okay in summer as long as it didn't rain. The furnishings were lightweight, carpets worn through, woodwork covered in paint faded years since to the color of an ancient keyboard. The telephone (only once had Dolan dared speak to her on this vulnerable line) hung on the kitchen wall. For a yard around it, the wallpaper was peppered with a buckshot explosion of scrawled numbers and messages.

She found a bottle of gin and gave him a drink he did not want. "Relax," she said, bouncing into place beside him on the sprung settee, tucking a leg under her where he could not miss seeing the plump, shiny curve where calf met thigh.

She surveyed him with delight. "You're among friends, Casey. Don't look so mournful."

She gave him butterfly kisses with her eyelashes. He let his hand rest on that smooth leg. His anxiety evaporated and he began to share her excitement. The feeling reminded him of a time when he and some of the kids went into Woolworth's on Front Street and lifted a few lead soldiers. It was wrong and he knew he would hate himself later, but the urge had been irresistible.

Her bedroom was through a curtained doorway off the sitting room. She said, "Give me a minute," and went in there. Dolan sat, glass in both hands, elbows on knees, staring at the floor. Strange, he thought. The room smelled of decay, it showed no evidence of maintenance, and yet he sensed there was a stability about the place as if it would still be here, sheltering the Hopkins tribe in a hundred years, long after his tidy bungalow had been bulldozed and built over.

"Ready!"

He went to her in the silent bedroom, saw a small cot with the covers turned back, inviting in pink light from a tiny lamp. She was naked under a flimsy gown, torn at the hip. He embraced her and was so overpowered that he lost his balance and they did a struggling dance, laughing at themselves. "You'd better lie down," she said, "before you fall down."

The front door opened, then closed with a slam. Alvin's voice was bored. "Carmen? You home?"

Dolan went ice cold. He stepped away from her and faced the curtain. Footsteps in the other room. The brother's boots showed in the light at the hem of the curtain. "You decent, kid?"

"Yes," she said in a tone of great weariness.

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"What is it?"

"You may as well come in."

Alvin drew the curtain aside. He saw Dolan, saw his sister sitting on the edge of the bed. "What the hell?" He stayed where he was but raised his arm and pointed a finger at Dolan's face. "You bastard!"

"Alvin, calm down. He's here because I asked him. I work, I bring in money—"

"Shut your mouth."

"You don't own me!"

"Shut up!" Alvin's voice rose. He moved toward Dolan.

"Listen! Listen to me!" Carmen ran at her brother, grabbed his arm, and used her strength to turn him. "You touch him, you lay a hand on him—" her finger was in his face now "—and I'll be gone so far from here you'll never see me again!"

Dolan felt as if he had been tied hand and foot and set on fire. He was due to die horribly and could do nothing about it. Shock numbed him. "I don't want any trouble," he said lamely, able to feel embarrassment through his panic at the weakness of his response.

"Just go, Casey." Carmen put her back against her brother, making way for Dolan's departure. "Don't say anything, get out, I'll take care of this." As he fled, she told him, "I'll talk to you tomorrow."

Seated in his car where he had parked it on the next street, Dolan had to wait a good minute before his fingers could fit the key to the ignition lock. As he drove away, he assured himself of one good thing emerging from the debacle—he would certainly not be spending any more time with that dangerous little bitch.

Carmen was waiting for Dolan in the Coronet lounge. She had telephoned in sick to the radio station, taking a day's leave. At four in the afternoon, with his evening broadcast mostly prepared, he had responded to her call and come down to see her. She was halfway through a beer. Soon due on the air, Dolan ordered coffee.

"Can you believe it?" she opened. "That whole business about the stag in Montreal was a put-on. He suspected us. He set it up to catch you with me."

Dolan could believe anything of Alvin and he said so.

"You don't have to worry," she said. "I'm sorry I put you through it."

"Not your fault," he said bleakly. But he thought it was—why

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couldn't she just leave him alone? He was old enough to be her father. Why all the provocative attention?

"We talked for a long time after you left. Alvin can be sweet when you approach him the right way. At first he didn't want to know, but I kept on and finally he understood. We love each other."

"Carmen, did you see his face?"

"He was all right later. I told him you want to marry me."

"Carmen—"

"Don't you? Are you just in this for what you can get?"

"You know better."

"Well?"

He tried to be patient with this stubborn child. "I *have* a wife."

"You talk as if you've got cancer. Millions of men get cured of wives. It's called divorce."

"It takes two to get a divorce."

"Have you asked her? She doesn't even live with you. She's over in Centralia having a ball running her store. She's probably waiting for you to bring up the subject."

It was all so complicated. What had happened to the quiet life he used to think was boring? A divorce would cost money. A wedding would cost money. Carmen would get pregnant. Babies cost money. He would be the oldest daddy in Baytown—laughter in the beverage rooms, to say the least.

He drank his coffee doggedly, aware that she was watching him across her beer.

"Okay," he said at last. "I'll drive over to Centralia and put the question to her."

Dolan waited until Sunday when he had no program to do and then drove down the bayshore road through a region of dairy farms and acres of half-grown corn, reaching the concrete towers of Centralia at five o'clock in the afternoon.

He had always hated the big city. Years ago, the Redmen had come up against Centralia in a sudden-death semifinal leading to the Southern Ontario Baseball League championship. Baytown lost the game eleven to four, and Dolan, besides going hitless, had allowed the ball to get past him twice and each time a run scored while he was scrambling around twenty feet behind homeplate, trying to find the handle.

Warned by his telephone call the day before, Anna was waiting for him in the back garden when he walked around the side of the

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house. It was bigger than his place back home, but she was only renting it, furnished. Reclining in a folding chair, an empty one beside her, she raised her sunglasses and studied him as he shambled across the grass.

"You've lost weight," she said.

"Pining away without you."

"You look younger." Her voice and her frown conveyed suspicion. "What's her name?"

There was a pitcher of lemonade and a couple of glasses on a table between the chairs. He poured himself a splash and sat down. "You're a mindreader."

"Why else would you ask to come and see me?"

"Maybe I miss you."

"Maybe, but you don't." She had not taken her eyes from his face. "Don't look so pathetic. I wrote us off a long time ago."

"I hate it when you say that."

"Stop clinging to a finished thing. Move on, Case."

He set down his empty glass on the tin table. It rang like the signal for the start of round one. "Funny you should say that, Annie. I need a divorce."

"So. What's her name?"

"Carmen Hopkins."

Anna Dolan turned her head.

"Is that the fat little teenager I met the last time I came into the station? You must be joking."

"She's a clever young woman."

"She's a bloody genius if she's trapped you." Her face was pale, she looked her age. "Is she pregnant?"

"Not that I've heard."

"She's saving her trump card. Casey, listen to me, I'm about to do you a favor."

"I'm listening."

"No way will I ever grant you a divorce to marry that carnivorous high-school dropout. If you were to come to me with some mature, intelligent, decent woman—" She watched his face for a few minutes while he counted blooms on hollyhocks. Then she got up and carried the pitcher and her glass to the house. "Crazy," she threw back at him. "Out of sight."

Dolan came in a few minutes later and heard the shower drumming. He wandered through rooms he had seen only once before. He used to believe, like a kid, that he and Anna in the house in Baytown

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were permanent because nothing else could ever contain their relationship. He was wrong. There was always another way.

She joined him as he was exploring the bedroom. It was a new robe, soft toweling in a shade of blue he liked, and she smelled of the lilac soap she had brought into his life decades ago. She stood beside him; there was noplace for his arm except across her hip. They slipped easily into a familiar embrace. As they kissed, she whispered, "I was hoping you hadn't driven all this way just to argue."

"Seems I didn't," he said.

In the next hour, the light in the room diminished slowly as afternoon became evening. Casey lay at ease with Anna tucked close against his side. The occasional things she said buzzed against his ear. He was falling asleep. The trip had solved nothing. All it proved was that he and Anna could still get it on, but that had never been in doubt. They could not live together, and she would never, clearly, release him to marry Carmen.

"No divorce?"

"No divorce."

"You're a bitch," he said.

"I'm the best friend you ever had."

They ate something at nine o'clock. By ten, he was outside unlocking the car, making his escape from boredom, the nagging that was beginning to emerge—not all hers, he was dishing out his share. The car smelled strange inside, but he cranked down the window, switched on, and began to roll. Then Alvin Hopkins got up off the floor behind the driver's seat and put a knife against his neck.

"Hey!" The car swerved before Casey got control and stepped on the brake, easing to a stop fifty yards from Anna's house.

"Keep driving."

"How the hell did you get in here?"

"You shouldn't have given Carmen your spare key. She doesn't even have a license."

"She told me she does."

"She tells you lots of things. Like I was going to Montreal for a friend's wedding."

"She made that up?"

"That's right. My sister is crazy, don't you know that? After Pete crashed his truck and died, she went out of the house one night and

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put her head on the mainline track, waiting for the Toronto express. I think she knew I'd find her and bring her back but I'm not sure."

"So the whole story about she'd be alone in the house for a couple of days was to get me found there by you."

"She likes excitement."

They drove slowly, in silence, down empty streets. At last Dolan said, "Where are we going?"

"*I'm* going back to Baytown. By bus, the way I came."

Dolan felt, at last, the cold tide of fear. It filled his gut, loosened his muscles, his foot relaxed on the accelerator.

"Don't do anything crazy."

"Keep driving. Turn left at the corner."

They drove into an area with trees and shrubs on either side of the road. Streetlamps cast pools of brilliance which only emphasized the black distances beyond.

"Slow down. Pull off over there, between the lights. Here."

Dolan switched off and sat, trembling, sweating ice-water. "If you want me to stay away from Carmen, you've got it. I was just with my wife—we're planning on getting back together."

"It's Carmen staying away from you. She'll never do it, no matter what I tell her. She's a bad little girl. It's vital that I prevent her having her own way. The kid is spoiled rotten." Alvin leaned forward. "Now look at this. I want you to see something." He held the knife blade in front of Dolan's face. The thick fist, the muscular wrist formed an unbreakable grip that trembled slightly. The blade itself gleamed—at least seven inches long, a streak of oil on the honed edge. "If you yell. If you run. If you do anything but as I say, this goes into your gut and I turn it."

"Oh, Jesus," Dolan whimpered. "Jesus."

"Get out of the car. Slowly."

Hopkins was out and waiting for him on the pavement, took his arm as he slammed the door and led the old ballplayer away from the light and down a pathway smelling of ripe earth. Furtive movement occurred at intervals in the shadows. "This is where the Gays hang out," Alvin said. "We're not alone."

They came to a silent clearing. Dolan could make out the surroundings, could see the shape of Alvin Hopkins as he was forced around to face him. "You'll be robbed and stabbed a lot. They have these crazy killings here all the time. But you've behaved, so I'm not going to hurt you. This blade is razor-sharp. I'll cut your

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throat—you won't even feel it. Then I'll do the rest. Believe me, it won't hurt."

Casey Dolan found the desperate courage to raise his voice. "Not going to hurt me?" he screamed. "Bloody hell, you're *killing* me!"

Alvin moved swiftly, turned Dolan, lifted his chin, and swung the knife. And he was right about that important thing—Dolan didn't even feel it.

Six months passed, during which Carmen Hopkins stayed late every night at the radio station. She told her brother she was writing a novel. He didn't believe her, he thought she was messing around with Dolan's replacement. But try as he would, however often he popped in unexpectedly, he always found her at the old typewriter, knocking hell out of the keys.

Then it was finished and she began coming home after work, eating whatever he put in front of her, then watching television until signoff. It was agreeable in a way, a nice routine which Alvin appreciated. But she was putting on weight and had stopped doing anything with her hair, which gave him an uneasy feeling. In fact, by the end of the year she was looking more like a fat sloven than his sexy little sister.

"You should take a look at yourself in the mirror," he said to her one evening.

"You should burn in hell," was her calm response.

The letter from Toronto came one Saturday morning while Carmen was still in bed. She received little mail, but whatever arrived with her name on it Alvin opened and read. This one was first-class, typewritten envelope, a company name in the corner—Tandem Publishing Ltd. The letter was brief. It said:

"Dear Miss Hopkins:

Thank you for letting us see your novel, *Hey, Don't You Remember?* It needs a bit of tightening but it is a powerful work and we would like to publish it. Is it autobiographical? The character of the psychopathic brother, Al, is particularly well drawn, while the doomed love affair between the young girl and the broadcaster is poignant, to say the least.

Can you come to Toronto and talk to us? I'll look forward to an early reply—"

Holding letter and envelope in one hand, Alvin shuffled across the room in his broken slippers, drew back the curtain, and went through into the musty cave where Carmen lay asleep on her cot.

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She was breathing slowly, a hand resting below her chin, wrinkled thumb not far from her open mouth. When it used to be his job to watch her as a child, Alvin had repeatedly dragged the wet thumb free, trying to break her of the habit. Another failure.

Now he had a new problem. His little sister was going to become a published author. She would be rich and famous and a guest on TV chat shows, where she would discuss the background of her book. Or not. It was up to him and he would have to make up his mind soon.

Counting her shallow breaths, eyeing the pillow on the floor beside the cot, Alvin smiled with deep affection. "Carmen, Carmen," he said softly, "what in the world am I going to do with you?"

"Q"

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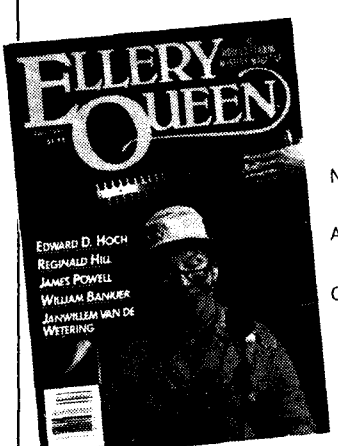

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a ***NEW*** **Ben Snow story by**

EDWARD D. HOCH

They must have some reason for thinking Pedro Mapimi was guilty of the banker's murder, Ben said.

"Only because of the knife," Molly Tyne told him. "They have this warped notion that if somebody uses a knife for murder, it must be a Mexican."

"Did they have a trial?"

"Sure—or what passes for a trial in Tasco. It was held this morning, and the victim's son was the judge . . ."

THE ONLY TREE IN TASCO

by EDWARD D. HOCH

On the afternoon Ben Snow rode into town, they were preparing the only tree in Tasco for a hanging. It was an old sturdy pine at one end of the main street, and Ben figured it had been put to such use many times in the past. He was on his way south, toward the Mexican border, and planned to pause in Tasco only long enough for a couple of drinks and a hot meal.

"When's the hanging?" he asked the bartender at the saloon.

"First thing in the mornin'. They got the rope up already."

"I saw it."

"Mexican fella. Used a knife on our town banker. Gouged out half his chest. A terrible bloody murder! You ask me, hanging's too good for him."

Ben finished his drink and asked directions to the town's eating place. The bartender directed him to a small house called Molly's Kitchen. "Best food between here and Santa Fe," he said. "Take my word for it."

The food at Molly's Kitchen was good, and Ben appreciated it after

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several days on the trail. He appreciated Molly Tyne even more. She was a handsome young woman from back East, full of energy and bustle, and as he finished the meal he couldn't help asking, "How did you happen to find your way to a place like Tasco?"

"I came West with the railroad," she explained while she wiped off a table just vacated by a middle-aged couple. "After working at a couple of Harvey restaurants, I decided to beat them to it and open a place of my own. I came to Tasco a year ago because I'd heard the railroad's southern route was coming through here. I'm still waiting for it."

"Not a pleasant place to wait," he observed, "what with stabbings and hangings."

"Pedro Mapimi—the Mexican they want to hang—is innocent. He was helping me clean the kitchen at the time of the murder. But no one will listen to me."

"They must have some reason for thinking he's guilty," Ben said, taking a sip of his coffee.

"Only because of the knife. They have this warped notion that if somebody uses a knife for murder, it must be a Mexican."

"Did they have a trial?"

"Sure." She tossed her brown hair angrily. "Or what passes for a trial in Tasco. It was held this morning, and the victim's son was the judge. Does that sound fair?"

Ben hated to become involved in local affairs, and he was anxious to be on the trail again. Still he wouldn't sleep well if he rode out of town knowing a possibly innocent man might be swinging from that tree limb in the morning. "What's the judge's name?" he asked. "And where can I find him?"

"His name is Earl Kaiser. His father Bert owned the bank."

"Was there evidence of robbery?"

"None. The murder wasn't at the bank, it was at his home. Bert Kaiser would never have let Pedro through his front door in the first place. That's why the whole thing is so unbelievable."

Ben didn't bother pointing out that Pedro might have entered through a rear door, uninvited.

"Did Earl live with his father?"

"No. He lives upstairs over his dry-goods store. He's only judge part of the time."

"I think I'll go see him," Ben said.

"Why do you care whether Pedro lives or dies?" she asked.

"Maybe I don't. That's what I want to find out."

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It was early evening when Ben climbed the stairs to the living quarters above the dry-goods store, but the summer sun was still high in the western sky. Earl Kaiser wasn't alone, and for a moment Ben thought the young blonde woman with him was his wife. When she made a quick and embarrassed exit into the bedroom, he realized his mistake.

"What can I do for you?" Earl Kaiser asked, not yet ready to allow Ben past the doorway. "The store's closed till morning."

"It's not about the store. I'm interested in the murder trial."

"Pedro Mapimi got a fair trial, and he'll get a fair hangin' in the morning."

"I'd like to talk about it. Seems to me it can't be all that fair when the judge is the victim's own son."

Kaiser's eyes narrowed. He had an unpleasant look at best, and that only reenforced it. "You wouldn't be a U.S. marshal by any chance, would you?"

"Name's Ben Snow. I'd like to come in and ask you a few questions."

Kaiser stepped aside reluctantly. "I can give you five minutes. As you could see, I'm entertaining a young lady."

Ben sat down. "Tell me about your father's murder."

"He was done in two nights ago by that thieving Mexican. I'm the only judge outside the county seat, so I tried the case. We had a jury of six local men and the evidence was presented good and proper. Most towns around here, Pedro Mapimi would have been shot dead on the spot. We gave him a fair trial."

"I understand Pedro had an alibi."

"Worth nothing! He was helping Miss Molly for about a half hour, but the killing could have happened any time between eight and ten o'clock. I found my father's body at ten when I stopped at the house to see him."

"What was the condition of the body?"

"My father's chest had been gouged by repeated stab wounds. It was horrible! I thought at first someone had tried to cut out his heart."

"What made you think of Mapimi?"

"They'd argued recently. He wanted a loan from my father's bank to buy some cattle. Can you imagine that—a Mexican owning a cattle ranch up here?"

"But would he have killed your father over that?"

"He made threatening remarks at the saloon. People heard him."

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"Still—"

"He's a vicious man. I saw him pull his knife one night at the bar just because someone made a remark about Mexicans."

"Surely a great many people in Tasco carry knives."

"No, they don't. We try for a bit of civilization here, Mr. Snow." He glanced pointedly at Ben's gunbelt. "You'll notice the townsfolk don't generally carry weapons at all."

"I'd like to speak with Pedro before the hanging."

"That's up to Sheriff Scott. He's in charge of the prisoner."

Ben nodded. "Thank you for your help."

"Where you from, Marshal?"

"I didn't say I was a marshal," Ben told him as he went out the door.

The jail was a one-story building two blocks down from Molly's Kitchen. Sheriff Scott had just turned the night duty over to a deputy and was preparing to leave when Ben walked in. "What can I do for you, stranger?" he asked.

"I'm here to see Pedro Mapimi before the execution. Judge Kaiser said it would be all right."

"He did, did he? What do you want to see him for?"

"I'm looking into the trial. I want to make sure it was all honest and aboveboard."

"There was nothing wrong with the trial."

"It came quite soon after the murder."

"We'd have had it yesterday, but we had to bury Bert Kaiser first."

"And with his son being the judge and all—"

"It was a fair trial."

"You examined the murder scene?"

"I sure did. Earl came running for me as soon as he found the body. I never seen anything like it—only a Mexican could have cut him up like that."

"I understand there was no sign of a robbery."

"No, but Kaiser's six-shooter was near his body. Looked as if he took it out to protect himself, or to capture a thief."

"Could I see Pedro?"

The sheriff pointed at Ben's holster. "The gunbelt stays out here."

"Of course." Ben unbuckled it and laid it on the desk.

Sheriff Scott roused himself from behind the desk, picked a ring of keys from a wall hook, and led the way through a barred door to

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the prison area. There were only three cells, and just one was occupied. "You get ten minutes," the sheriff said. "No more."

Pedro Mapimi glanced up as Ben entered the cell. "Who are you?" he said in fair English. "What do you want?"

"I'm a friend of Molly's. She asked me to help you if I could."

"No one can help me. They will hang me in the morning."

Ben sat down on the hard bunk next to him. "Did you kill Bert Kaiser?"

"No. I never even see the man except at his bank. I would never go to his house and threaten him. I am not a criminal."

"You have no alibi for the time of the killing," Ben said.

"I was with Miss Molly. She told them, but they would not listen."

"But Kaiser did turn you down for a cattle loan. You threatened him."

"I may have said something in the bar about not liking the man, but I never threatened to kill him. And I did not kill him—someone must believe me!"

"Is there anyone at all besides Miss Molly who might support what you say?"

He shook his head. "No one has come forward."

"What about your knife? Did they examine it for bloodstains?"

"They said I had washed it off. Even keeping a shiny knife is evidence of my guilt."

Ben wanted to believe the man, if only because he himself had once been falsely accused of murder. Some even accused him of being Billy the Kid long after the real Billy was dead and buried. "What about the money? After Kaiser turned you down, did you try anywhere else?"

The Mexican thought for a moment. "I asked Sam Easton. He was the one selling me the property and I thought some arrangement might be worked out. He offered me a generous mortgage, but I still had no money for the down payment."

"I might talk to him," Ben decided. "Where can I find him?"

"Maybe at his ranch just outside of town, on the north road." The Mexican stared into Ben Snow's eyes. "Do you really think there's any chance for me?"

"We'll see."

Ben took his horse Oats out of the stable and rode along the north road until he came to the Easton ranch. He'd once worked at a ranch in Texas that was huge by comparison, but in the fading light he

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could see this one had some good grazing land. As he dismounted there was a muffled explosion from across the field, and he watched a cloud of smoke and rock shoot into the air. A stocky white-haired man spotted his arrival and headed in his direction, calling out to some other ranch hands, "Getting too dark for any more blasting. Better start gathering up the equipment."

"You'd be Mr. Sam Easton?" Ben asked as the man drew closer.

"That's me, son. Lookin' for work?"

"No, just information." Ben nodded across the field where the blasting had been.

Easton motioned with his hand. "That south pasture's full of boulders. We been blasting for two days now and there's more to be done." He took off his wide-brimmed hat to beat the dust from it. "What sort of information you lookin' for?"

"I'm investigating the murder of Bert Kaiser the other night."

"Yeah. That poor Mexican kid got himself in a heap of trouble."

"Pedro says he was buying some ranch land from you."

"Fifty acres, if he could raise the money. That's the way I got started, and I wanted to help him out if I could. What'd you say your name was?"

"Ben Snow."

"Come along with me, Ben. I got to lock up the dynamite box." They started strolling back toward the field and Easton ran over the details of the land transaction. "I suppose I can't blame old man Kaiser for turning him down. He's done the same thing to me on occasion. But I still felt sorry for Pedro. It was a terrible disappointment for him."

"Enough of a disappointment that he'd kill Bert Kaiser?"

Easton shook his head. "I just don't think he did it. I wish to hell I'd been on that jury."

"His son doesn't seem too broken up about it."

"Why should he be? He inherits that nice big house and the banking business, too. It beats running a dry-goods store." They'd reached a couple of wooden boxes and Easton picked one up. "Can you bring the other?" he asked Ben. "There are only a few sticks in it. Don't worry—it won't explode."

It was dark by the time they'd locked the dynamite in a wooden shed for the night. "How far is the Kaiser house from here?" Ben asked.

"About two miles across the pastureland. Further by road. Come on in the house, Mr. Snow. I'll treat you to some good whiskey."

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Easton's wife was a pretty, middle-aged woman named Julie who fussed around, making their guest comfortable. "It's a shame about Pedro," she agreed, bringing out some fancy glasses for their drinks. "I don't think I'll sleep a wink tonight, thinking about him hanging in the morning."

"You didn't happen to notice any strangers nearby the night of the killing?" Ben asked, savoring the whiskey.

Easton thought about it. "Can't say that I did. I was out hunting early that evening, but I didn't notice anyone else."

Ben walked to the stone fireplace and studied a rifle that hung there. "I never saw a gun like that. Could I examine it?"

Easton took it down. "It's my favorite hunting rifle—a .458-caliber Winchester, big enough to kill a buffalo, or an elephant if one was around. Look at the size of this cartridge! There isn't another weapon like this in the whole county."

"It's impressive," Ben admitted, fingering the long rifle cartridge. "But what do you hunt with it?"

"I was after deer the other night, but you never know when a stray bear might wander down this way."

"Did you see anything?"

Easton shook his head. "Didn't get a shot."

"Stop boring Mr. Snow with your hunting exploits, dear," his wife said. "Will you be in town long, Mr. Snow?"

"Probably just till tomorrow. I've been talking to people who might be able to help Pedro's case, but I'm running out of names."

"How about Mrs. Fernandez?" Julie Easton suggested. "She was Kaiser's nearest neighbor. She might have seen something."

"Thanks," Ben said. "And thanks for the drink. I'll be going now."

"Come again," Easton told him. "Visitors are always welcome here."

On the ride back to town, Ben wondered about this man with a charming wife who handled dynamite and a large-bore rifle with such ease. Perhaps he was the sort that was needed to tame the West.

Mrs. Fernandez lived in a small house down the road from the Kaiser place. She was reluctant to let a stranger in after dark and so Ben was forced to speak with her through the partly opened door. "I don't know anything," she informed him, speaking with a thick accent. "I see nothing, no one."

"It would have been about this time, shortly after dark—"

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"I tell the sheriff everything I know. I hear one shot, nothing more, from the direction of the house."

"A shot?" Ben remembered Sheriff Scott saying Kaiser's pistol had been found near the body. "Do you remember the time?"

"Sure. I look at clock. It was nine-fifteen."

He tried to remember if Molly had pinpointed the time Pedro was with her. "Did you tell this to Sheriff Scott?"

"I tell. He say I am mistaken. Must be hunter in field if there was a shot."

"Thank you, Mrs. Fernandez." Ben left the house and headed back toward Molly's Kitchen. Sam Easton had seen no other hunters and had not taken a shot himself, so the sound Mrs. Fernandez heard had not been from a hunter.

The eating place was closed, but there was a light inside. Ben pounded on the door until Molly finally arrived to open it. She stared at him an instant before she remembered who he was. "Oh—Mr. Snow, isn't it? What brings you back? I'm afraid we're closed now."

"I spoke with Earl Kaiser, and also with Pedro. I've had a busy evening."

After staring at him several moments longer, she stepped aside to let him enter. "Come in , please." In the light from the lanterns, her skin had a soft angelic glow.

"I need to know one thing. Earl Kaiser says Pedro was only helping you for half an hour."

"A little longer than that. He was here from just before nine until nine-thirty. I know Earl says his father could have been killed any time between eight and ten, but I don't believe that. Earl found the body at ten, and the killer certainly needed more than a few minutes before and after the crime."

"If we could show that Kaiser was killed at nine-fifteen, could you swear that Pedro was with you?"

"Certainly!"

"Then I think we have a chance."

But she seemed more depressed than ever. "We're just too late. Everyone has gone to bed now, and Earl Kaiser is hardly going to order a stay of execution."

"An appeals court would never allow that verdict to stand, with the victim's son sitting as judge."

"Of course not. But by the time anyone hears about it, Pedro will be dead and buried."

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"Maybe not," Ben told her. "Maybe there's a way to delay the execution."

"What do you mean?"

"It's better if you don't know," Ben said.

He headed back out toward the Easton ranch. It was nearly midnight now and there were no lights burning in the main house when it came into view. Ben dismounted, tied Oats to a bush, and went the final distance on foot. When he reached the locked shed where the dynamite was stored, he used the barrel of his revolver to pry the hasp from the old wood to which it was screwed. He'd been prepared to fire a bullet into the padlock, but happily that wasn't necessary.

He rode back toward Tasco with three sticks of dynamite in his saddlebag. His original plan was a simple one—to blast a hole in the wall of the jail and ride off with Pedro. But when he reached the sleeping town, he saw at once that there were at least two drawbacks to such action: two deputies had been stationed outside the jail with rifles and Ben wasn't prepared to risk innocent lives, and an explosion against the wall of Pedro's cell might well injure the man he was trying to rescue.

Ben's first reaction was one of frustration. Perhaps he should forget the whole thing, but Mrs. Fernandez's story about the gunshot, along with Molly's alibi for Pedro, had convinced him of Pedro's innocence. He turned Oats away from the jail and headed back to the edge of town, toward the only tree in Tasco.

A single stick of dynamite should be enough, he decided, tying it to the trunk of the tree near the ground and lighting the fuse.

It was shortly after one o'clock when the blast shattered the silence of the night. Watching from a distance, Ben saw the ancient pine tree shudder and begin to topple. It hit the ground with a sigh, its limbs cushioning the fall.

Molly Tyne had promised Ben a cot in the storeroom of the Kitchen and he caught a few hours' sleep there, trying to ignore the muffled shouts and commotion from the street. The explosion had roused the town.

Molly woke him just after dawn, shaking him gently. "Ben! Ben, wake up!"

"What is it?" he asked, catching the panic in her voice.

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"Sheriff Scott has his deputies at work on a temporary scaffold outside the jail. He says Pedro will be hanged as soon as it's finished."

Ben drank a cup of Molly's coffee while he dressed, then strapped on his gunbelt and headed for the jail. Sheriff Scott intercepted him on the way. "Been looking for you, Mr. Snow. We had a bit of trouble during the night. Someone dynamited the tree where we were going to hang Pedro Mapimi. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

"How would I know about it?"

"Sam Easton was using the dynamite to clear his field of boulders. He says you helped him lock it away in the shed last night. Later someone broke into the shed and stole some of it."

"I can't help you there, Sheriff. I guess I must have slept through the explosion."

"Fat chance of that!" the sheriff bellowed. "We don't like strangers meddling in town business, Snow! We don't like them dynamiting our only tree just to save a murderer from the gallows! When we hang Pedro in a couple of hours, we just might be able to find an extra rope for you!"

The jail came into view and Ben could see that work was well under way on the temporary gallows. They weren't bothering with steps and a platform—only a tall upright piece of timber and a crosspiece from which the noose would hang. Pedro would be brought to the gallows on horseback in the traditional western manner. "I can prove he didn't do it," Ben told the sheriff. "You have to listen to me."

"I'm always willing to listen. Start talking."

"Kaiser's neighbor, Mrs. Fernandez, heard a single shot around nine-fifteen. There were no hunters out that night except for Sam Easton, and he told me he didn't fire his gun. That shot had to be Kaiser firing his six-gun at the killer. But Pedro couldn't have been at his house at nine-fifteen because he was with Molly Tyne from before nine to nine-thirty."

Sheriff Scott listened in silence, then motioned Ben to follow him into the jail. He opened the drawer of his wooden filing cabinet and took out a shiny long-barreled revolver. "This is Bert Kaiser's pistol. I found it myself, next to his body. Go ahead—look at it."

Ben opened the cylinder and saw that the weapon was fully loaded. He sighted down the inside of the barrel. "It hasn't been fired since it was last cleaned," he said.

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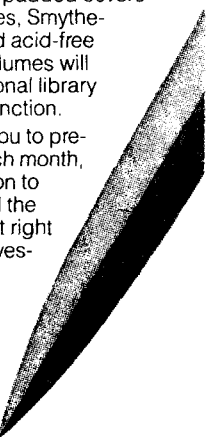

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"That's right. That's how I found it. Mrs. Fernandez didn't hear any shot."

"Why would she lie?"

"Because she's a Mexican, like Pedro. She was trying to save him."

"Pretty funny way to do it. She couldn't have known about this gun, or about Pedro's alibi, for that matter."

"A couple of hours from now it won't matter," the sheriff said, looking out the open door at the scaffold.

"It'll matter to Pedro and it'll matter to me. Look here, you get Earl Kaiser to call that court into session again and I'll prove Pedro didn't do it."

"How you goin' to do that? I just showed you Kaiser's unfired pistol. Pedro's alibi isn't worth a damn!"

"I think it is. That unfired pistol not only tells me Pedro is innocent, it tells me who's guilty."

By ten o'clock that morning, Earl Kaiser had reluctantly agreed to reconvene the trial of Pedro Mapimi on the basis of new evidence. "It's highly irregular," he told Ben at first. "The man's already been tried and convicted."

"It's also highly irregular for you to serve as judge," Ben pointed out. "If you deny a rehearing now and go ahead with the execution, it will appear that you did so only because the victim was your father."

"I'll give you an hour," Kaiser said finally, overruling Sheriff Scott's objections. "We can still hang Pedro before noon."

Even as the six-member jury was reassembling and Pedro was being brought from his jail cell to the barroom that served as a courtroom, he was still complaining. "What about dynamiting the tree? Are we going to try the fellow who did that?"

"If you have any evidence, Sheriff," Kaiser said.

"Sam Easton will testify that Snow knew about the dynamite."

"That's not enough," Kaiser told him. "Forget the damn tree and let's get started." He turned to Ben. "You claim to have new evidence in the case of the People versus Pedro Mapimi?"

Ben got to his feet. "I have, Your Honor." He glanced around and saw that Molly was seated among the spectators, not far from where Pedro sat. Mrs. Fernandez was there, too, and Sam Easton with his wife Julie.

"Proceed with it." Outside, the hammering on the scaffold in front of the jail had ceased. It was ready for the hanging.

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Ben cleared his throat and started talking. "When I arrived in Tasco yesterday, the trial of Pedro Mapimi was already over. He'd been convicted of murdering Bert Kaiser, president of your bank. So far as I know, there was nobody to speak in his defense, and the evidence was flimsy at best. He'd been denied a loan by Mr. Kaiser, he'd made some sort of threat against him in this barroom, and Kaiser had been viciously murdered by a knife such as Pedro always carried. No one else in town appears to carry such a weapon regularly. That was the extent of the so-called evidence. Placed against it is Molly Tyne's testimony that Pedro was with her at the time of the killing."

Earl Kaiser spoke. "It has been shown that my father could have been killed before or after the alibi period."

"True enough," Ben agreed. "But then we're confronted with Mrs. Fernandez and her story of hearing a single shot around nine-fifteen. My first thought was that this had to have been fired by Bert Kaiser in defense of his life, but Sheriff Scott showed me the pistol, which hadn't been fired since its last cleaning. I refuse to believe Mrs. Fernandez invented the shot to help Pedro, because it did no such thing. If she'd wanted a false story that would help him, she'd have claimed to have seen a mysterious stranger near the Kaiser house. We must accept her story of the shot as true, and that raises an interesting question. What gun was fired, and where did the bullet go?"

"Hunters," Sheriff Scott muttered.

"Not hunters, according to Sam Easton's story," Ben said. "If Mrs. Fernandez thought the shot came from the direction of the Kaiser house, I'm willing to accept the fact that it did. Bert Kaiser's weapon was unfired, and we can rule out the presence of a third person in the house at the time. If a shot was fired, it was fired by Kaiser's killer."

There was a stir among the spectators and Earl Kaiser pounded his gavel for order. "Proceed, Mr. Snow."

"Assuming that any obvious bullethole would have been spotted by the sheriff, we must ask where the bullet went. I think the answer is obvious. It went into the body of Bert Kaiser. He was killed by a bullet, not a knife."

"That's crazy!" Sheriff Scott protested. "If a bullet killed him, why was his chest cut open like that?"

"To recover the bullet that killed him, Sheriff. The victim was cut

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open after death so the killer could retrieve the bullet. It's the only explanation for that awful gouging you've described."

"But why?"

"Because the bullet would have identified the killer without question. Who among you could be identified by a bullet from your gun? Who among you has the largest-caliber rifle in the county, by his own admission? Who was hunting with that rifle not far from Kaiser's home on the night of the murder?"

No one had to answer. Sam Easton sprang from his seat and ran for the door, where he collided with the same two deputies Ben had observed standing duty outside the jail the night before.

Molly brought Pedro to speak with Ben later. "How can I thank you?" Pedro said. "I would be dead by now if it wasn't for you."

"We were lucky the right information came my way," Ben said. "From the beginning it seemed to me the sheriff was overlooking a lot. He seemed to assume only you carried a knife, but anyone out hunting would be carrying a knife. Easton was unlucky in one way. Ordinarily a bullet that powerful, fired at close range inside a house, would have gone right through the victim's body and come out the other side. In this case it must have hit a bone or been otherwise slowed down. When Easton realized it was still in the body, he knew he had to use his knife to retrieve it. He mentioned having some disagreements with Kaiser over money and I suppose that led to the killing."

"The sheriff says he's admitted everything. Kaiser wanted to foreclose on a loan. Easton stopped by the house after hunting and they argued about it. The banker picked up a pistol and ordered him out of the house, and Easton shot him in the chest with his rifle."

Ben thought about the waiting scaffold. "Will they hang him now?"

"There's no chance of that," Molly replied, a trace of bitterness in her voice. "He's not a Mexican, and he's a landowner. He'll be held in jail and then taken to the county seat for trial. I imagine he'll hire an attorney and plead self-defense."

"I guess I'll be on my way," Ben said. "I'm glad I was able to help you, Pedro."

On the way out of town he passed the splintered stump—all that remained of what had been the only tree in Tasco.

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Spaulding Bean is the pseudonym of the senior editor of a national weekly magazine who lives and works in New York City and has been trying to write fiction for eighteen years. This story, her first published fiction, puts us in mind of F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Cut-Glass Bowl," although the plot, of course, is totally different.

Did we say plot . . . ?

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE NOW?

by SPAULDING BEAN

"I just hope I don't live so long that dying isn't any fun," Elizabeth said.

Beryl stirred with the old wooden spoon, her eye on the oil as she dripped it into the egg yolk. John insisted on homemade mayonnaise, for the sake of making her make it, Beryl couldn't help but think, because her mayonnaise wasn't in fact very good and she kept a small jar of Hellmann's in the refrigerator for herself. "Fun?" she asked her mother-in-law.

"Well, it will be cancer, I expect," said Elizabeth. "So there will be the time after they tell me about it before it gets bad when I can be cheerful and everybody will be nice to me and think how brave I am."

Beryl stirred. The mayonnaise was coming, full and glossy. It always *looked* all right. "But then it *would* get bad," she said. "You're just bored. You should take up a hobby, and hope you get run over by a bus when you're ninety-nine."

"It's the attention," said Elizabeth wistfully, patting her thin white hair. And they both thought of John.

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John had moved them to the country when Elizabeth came to stay with them, and it had been lonely. They were fifteen miles from the little town of Purcell and had made few friends there. Friends didn't come out from Manhattan; indeed, John himself came in less and less from Manhattan. He had a small apartment there and, Beryl was sure, a mistress. Or, more likely, "girl friend." John was too cheap to take on the financial responsibility of a mistress. The only reason he isn't divorcing me, she thought, is that he would have to pay to put Elizabeth in a nursing home and pay me alimony.

"He said he'd be home tonight," Beryl said to Elizabeth, and they looked at each other. His arrival was all they had, and it wasn't much.

It was seven-thirty when he came in, stamping the snow from his feet in the front hall that Beryl had waxed the day before. A little stout, he had the face of a fat man, his double chin, full but tremulous, running down into a collar that always looked too tight. "I thought I told you to shovel the walk," he said to Beryl, and his tone was ferocious.

"I did shovel it," she answered nervously. "It snowed some more."

"I don't believe you," John said, throwing his wet coat on the couch.

He went into the kitchen, where he poured himself a large whiskey. Elizabeth called after him, "May I have some sherry, please, John?"

"Beryl will get it," he said.

He ate his dinner greedily and in silence, except for remarking that the pot roast was tough and the gravy watery. His little lips protruded from his fat face, and Beryl shivered with distaste as they opened and closed and wobbled as he chewed.

On Friday morning he told them he wouldn't be home until Sunday night, if then. He had to show some out-of-town clients around the city.

"But John, the car," Beryl said. John ordinarily insisted on driving himself to the station and leaving the car there. Beryl had to shop on weekends. She often felt, as she planned for the week, like the frontierswoman who took the buckboard to town every six months. She missed being able to run out to the corner grocery for extra butter. As for this weekend, she and Elizabeth usually drove to church, and they had been planning, counting on it, to go to the movies Friday night.

John told them no car . . .

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"I don't know how he got like this," Elizabeth said after he had left. "I try to think what I did wrong, but I honestly don't know."

"He wasn't this way when we got married," Beryl said. "I don't know when it started. I guess when we lived in town. I didn't notice, though, there was so much to do." She didn't add that whenever, however, it had started, she couldn't take much more of it.

She also didn't know when she started thinking about killing him. At first it just occurred to her that she could breathe again if John were dead. When had she begun wondering, hypothetically, as if she were writing a story, how one could kill him? It *was* hypothetical at first. Beryl had always read murder mysteries, and when the idea came to her, she became interested in how impossible it was, really, for a wife to kill a husband. She might have managed it while they were still living in New York, she thought dreamily, there were so many killings there, and the most straightforward methods seemed plausible. Stepping out of an alley and shooting him dead and disappearing, for example.

But out here one's every move was so easily scrutinized. She couldn't make a secret trip to New York. She couldn't buy poison—and what poison?—or a gun. If she suffocated him with a plastic bag, she wondered one night, and shoved a piece of half-chewed meat into his throat, would the difference in the cause of asphyxiation show up in an autopsy? But she couldn't get him to hold still for asphyxiation with a plastic bag, anyway—and she couldn't drug him, that *would* show up.

Winter gave way to spring. There was the garden to look forward to, but more than that, Beryl had taken to thinking so much of the time about how to kill John that it was very soothing. He was insulting, he was venomous, his fat chin and little lips went on wobbling, but in Beryl's mind there would be an end to it as soon as she could work it out. Quite apart from that, just having set herself the problem was invigorating. She was ashamed of her lack of imagination, though. Too many murder mysteries, perhaps: guns, poison, knives, and blunt instruments. Mushrooms and carbon monoxide and the heater dropped into the bath. Roald Dahl's leg of lamb. She wasn't clever, she realized sadly.

Elizabeth, in the meantime, not having a project of her own, was becoming more and more frail, from sheer loneliness and boredom. "I don't need another sweater, you don't need another sweater," she said crossly, ceasing to knit. "I'm thinking of pretending I'm an alcoholic and joining AA."

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"Not bad," Beryl said admiringly. "But we'd have trouble getting the car."

By June she had become impatient. Taking John's death for granted, she was vexed with herself for not having come up with a plan and found herself considering simply stabbing him with a kitchen knife or hitting him on the head with the maul in the toolshed, blaming an intruder. Or running him over with the car and telling the police—suitably hysterical—that it had been an accident. She wanted him dead.

It wasn't until August that she had the idea. It lacked the cleverness of a good murder in a story, but it was less clumsy than running him over. She went upstairs to the attic and rummaged around until she found the elaborate crystal punchbowl her aunt had given them as a wedding present. Flicking it with a fingernail, she nodded at the ring—it not be too thick.

She took it downstairs and put it on the hall table. For three weeks she kept it there, filled with flowers from the garden. Then for two more weeks she left it empty and dry. Elizabeth had to get used to the thing. Then she took it back upstairs to the second floor and set it on the blanket chest in the hall. It was now just a matter of waiting until Elizabeth was napping in the den at a moment when John happened to be changing his clothes upstairs.

The day came late in September. John had come home from a tennis game and gone upstairs to change. Elizabeth had nodded off in front of the television set. As quickly and efficiently as she got dinner on the table, Beryl locked the door to the den and hurried to the living room, where she took some fishing line, a hammer, and a rubber kitchen glove from her sewing basket. She went upstairs and tied the line securely to a post of the bannister at the top, tying the other end to a nail she had long since hammered across from it into the wall—a risk, but a better bet than bashing John on the head with his own maul.

The line stretched, strong and invisible, above the top step at the height of John's ankles. Stepping over it carefully, Beryl nipped across the upstairs hall, picked up the bowl, stepped over the line again, and carried the bowl to the front of the stairs. She looked at her watch. John had had time to change. It wouldn't make sense if he were found naked, or even in his underwear. She picked up the bowl and smashed it to the floor. As she had known he would, John came charging out of the bedroom.

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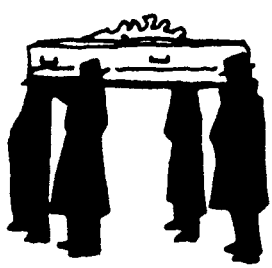
"What have you done now?" he shouted, and when she didn't answer, he started down the stairs.

He fell satisfactorily spreadeagled, and fortunately all the way to the bottom into the broken glass, a murderous crescent of which she picked up with a gloved hand. She stabbed him in the throat—then she climbed the stairs, removed the fishing line, and pulled out the nail with the hammer. The police might notice the nail hole, though Beryl thought not. The real clue they would never realize—the total impossibility of John's having been carrying the glass bowl, that he would never have done her the favor.

She ran down the stairs and put the rubber glove with its mate under the kitchen sink and unlocked the door to the den. She was pleased that Elizabeth, groping for her walker, had not made it to the door in time to find it "stuck."

And she was pleased, after the funeral, to see Elizabeth, surrounded, receiving the kind attention of friends, the flush on her cheeks a healthy pink. She would perk up even more back in the city, Beryl thought, where most of these same friends lived. And they could go to the movies as often as they liked.



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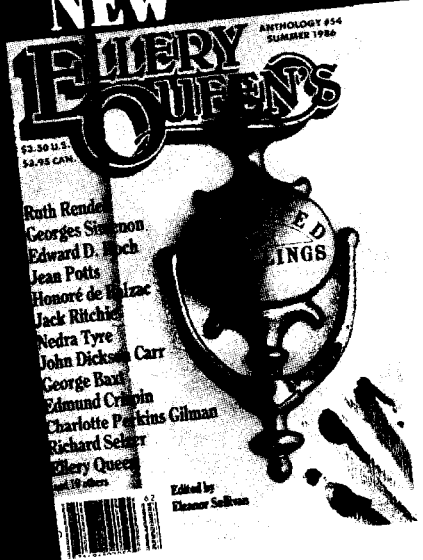

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a *NEW* Julian Quist story by

HUGH PENTECOST

The scene was being shot on New York City's East River Drive. It involved a car chase, with Buck Williams and ten-year-old Hugo Van Cortlandt in a jeep, racing after a black limousine that was headed toward the Triborough Bridge. Jerry Jardine didn't go for fakes. The Manhattan scenes had to be real, not a scenic artist's mock-up. No matter what the expense or the strings that had to be pulled with the city, Jardine's production would be for real . . .

DOUBLE DEATH

by HUGH PENTECOST

The brutal and savage murders of Buck Williams and young Hugo Van Cortlandt took place in front of thousands of witnesses, but not one of them was able to come forward with anything that would help the police. There had been special police at the scene when it happened, but they hadn't been there to protect a glamorous film star from anything but the overenthusiasm of a crowd that idolized him and might get in the way of the business at hand, which was the shooting of a scene from Jerry Jardine's latest film epic.

The scene was being shot on New York City's East River Drive. It involved a car chase, with Buck and ten-year-old Hugo Van Cortlandt in a jeep, racing after a black limousine that was headed toward the Triborough Bridge. It was to take place between rush hours, the right-hand lanes on the uptown side blocked off and guarded by special police. Pretty elaborate for one brief sequence in a film? Jerry Jardine doesn't go for fakes. The Manhattan scenes had to be real, not a scenic artist's mock-up. No matter what the

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expense or the strings that had to be pulled with the city, Jardine's production would be for real.

Buck Williams, the star of Jardine's newest epic, had skyrocketed to fame, first as all-star running back in the National Football League, recently inducted into football's Hall of Fame, and then as a romantic actor in films and on television. It wasn't just his fame as an athlete that made Williams a film idol. He was tall, blond, handsome—and he could act. He was deft at comedy and physically exciting in melodramatic action.

He died playing the hero in a melodrama.

Jerry Jardine, whose name was almost as famous as his star's, hadn't overlooked the publicity value of shooting a scene in midtown Manhattan, and every fan who could get time away from work or household chores would be eager to get a glimpse of Buck Williams racing uptown in an open jeep. The ten-year-old boy with him in the jeep meant nothing to them. They were there, lining the Drive, to see Buck—and they saw him die.

Voices sounded like a cheering wave as the jeep, at high speed, raced up the Drive. Buck was at the wheel, the boy standing behind him, clinging to his shoulders with one arm and pointing ahead to the car they were chasing.

And then there was a giant explosion that blew the vehicle and its two passengers high into the air, leaving nothing but shattered wreckage and Buck Williams and the boy actor dead beyond recall.

The news of the murder spread across the Western world like wildfire. It was as shocking and startling to millions of people as if, a generation ago, Clark Gable had been killed in public. There were no immediate answers, and millions of people were demanding them.

One place where answers were important was in the offices of Julian Quist Associates, located in a glass finger high above Park Avenue just north of Grand Central Station and a few blocks west of the spot where Buck Williams and the boy were killed. Julian Quist Associates was, perhaps, the top public-relations firm in the country, presenting and promoting actors, athletes, politicians, and new products to a world market.

Julian Quist—tall, fair, Greek-god handsome—was at the desk in his private office when the explosion rattled the windows of the office. He looked up, waiting, and then went back to his work. Ten minutes later, the office door burst open and Dan Garvey, his partner

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and closest friend, charged in. Garvey, a dark, slender, powerfully built man in his late thirties, looked like a man in shock.

"Did you hear that explosion before, Julian?"

Quist nodded, frowning.

"Buck Williams!" Garvey said. "He was shooting a scene for Jardine's film!" He came to the radio on Quist's desk and turned it on. The story of the disaster had usurped all other programming. Buck Williams was dead. Hugo Van Cortlandt, Jardine's stepson, working as an actor in the film, had died with him. Early police guesswork was that a bomb had been planted in the jeep in which the two actors were riding, timed to go off at a certain time or set off by remote control. The radio announcer commenced with a biography of Buck Williams and Garvey turned off the machine. "He was my friend, Julian."

"I know," Quist said.

Dan Garvey had been a star football player himself, playing on the same NFL football team as Williams. Around the time Williams went on to become an actor, Garvey had become a member of Quist's firm, handling the promotion of many of the country's top sporting events.

Quist reached for the phone. "Kreevich can probably bring us up to date."

Lieutenant Mark Kreevich of Manhattan's Homicide Squad was a close friend of both Quist and Garvey. "I can guess why you're calling, Julian," he said when he came on the line. "You're promoting Jardine's film, aren't you?"

"Yes. And Buck Williams was a close friend of Dan's."

"It's not my case yet," Kreevich said. "But of course all the details are sifting through here."

"And those details are—?"

"Nothing, so far. It's total confusion. Give me an hour and I'll call you back."

"I'm not waiting an hour," Garvey said after Quist hung up the phone. And he was gone, almost knocking down the lovely woman who had appeared in the doorway to the office. Lydia Morton was a researcher and writer for the firm. She and Quist had lived together for several years.

"Buck was at the top of his career," Quist said as she came into the office. "Who could have had it in for him? There were no scandals—he had a million friends and well wishers."

"I wonder, Julian," Lydia said. "Was *he* the main target? Think

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a minute. Jerry Jardine had several million dollars invested in a film that has now gone down the drain. Hugo Van Cortlandt was his wife's son by her first marriage. You couldn't do more damage to Jardine unless you killed him himself."

The realities about people did not determine whether Julian Quist undertook to represent them or their products. It was his job to make them look good, even irresistible. It had been his job to convey a picture of Jerry Jardine as a lively, witty, brilliant artist who produced films that brought special pleasure to millions of people around the world. In Quist's private opinion, Jardine was a vain, arrogant, self-centered lowlife who would walk over his best friend if it would get him something he wanted. That both he and Buck Williams had been clients of Julian Quist Associates was a coincidence. Julian had been hired especially to promote Jardine's new film. Buck had been a client since he first turned from sports to acting, Dan Garvey having persuaded his old friend and teammate that he needed the Quist expertise when he embarked on the new career. Buck had been the kind of client that made the public-relations business a pleasure. You didn't have to create a phony image. He had nothing to hide. He had married when he was a senior in college and people thought of Buck and Lisa Williams as an ideal couple. There had never been any whispered gossip about Buck Williams. He had been Mr. Nice Guy for real.

There were two women, Quist thought as he headed uptown toward the Jardines' elegant brownstone. Lisa Williams had lost her husband of almost twenty years without warning and Millicent Jardine had lost her son by violence, just as she had lost his father, her first husband. It was more than any woman should have been asked to endure. Quist wondered if Jardine would be too concerned with his own business disaster to console her.

Millicent had been the only child of the multimillionaire oil man, Hubert Maxwell. Her mother had died giving her birth. Her father had died in a commercial-plane accident when she was fifteen, leaving her one of the richest women in the world. When she was twenty, she married Baron Hugo Van Cortlandt, a European nobleman. It was a romantic affair that drew as many headlines as the wedding of Grace Kelly. Van Cortlandt was a sportscar fanatic and he was killed in a crash during a Grand Prix race in France, leaving his wife and infant son. A couple of years later, Millicent had met Jerry

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Jardine while he was shooting a film in the south of France. Swept off her feet, she had married him.

There were police cars outside the brownstone and a policeman at the front door barred Quist's way. Jardine was inside but seeing no one. Julian asked to have his name sent in with the message that he was here to offer help if he was needed.

Five minutes later, he was told that Jardine would see him. He was ushered into a beautifully paneled library. The house had been Millicent's father's, and no money had been spared on its charm and elegance. Jerry Jardine's normally bright-blue eyes were dazed, like those of a man under the influence of drugs or liquor, and a sardonic smile twisted his thin lips.

"I let them bring you in, Julian," he said, "to tell you you're out of a job."

"I came here as a friend, not your public-relations man," Quist said.

"Let's face it, Julian, you're not a friend. You're damn good at what you do for a living, which is why I hired you—not because you like me. In fact, you don't and we both know it. So—two hours ago, Jardine Films was suddenly faced with bankruptcy, the best film I ever undertook to make is never going to be finished, my wife's kid is dead, and an actor who was going to make me rich is on his way to the Pearly Gates. You know any way you can help?"

"How is Millicent taking it?" Quist asked.

"She doesn't know."

"Doesn't *know?*"

"There's no reason to make the homestretch any harder for her than it is," Jardine said.

"Homestretch? What are you talking about, Jerry?"

"My wife is dying! She's in a coma!"

The world was spinning very fast. "What is it?" Julian asked.

"Cancer. You'd think that was enough, wouldn't you? You wouldn't think a man would have to face that, and all the rest that's happened, would you?"

Quist heard his voice sounding unsteady. "I'm sorry, Jerry. I don't know what else to say. Or to do."

"You know everybody in the working press," Jardine said. "Try to keep them off my back for a little while, will you?"

"Do my best," Quist promised.

The library door opened and Frank Martin came into the room. He was Jardine's secretary and assistant, a middle-aged man with

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greying hair and pale eyes partially hidden behind steel-rimmed glasses. The joke around the film business was that Frank Martin was the safe-deposit box in which Jerry Jardine kept all his secrets. They had been together forever.

"Dr. Palmer thinks you should go upstairs, Jerry," he said, nodding to Julian. "He's afraid Millicent is slipping away."

"Why?" Jardine asked. "She can't recognize me, can't talk to me. I'm supposed to go up there and just watch it happen?" But he went.

Martin took off his glasses and cleaned them with a white-linen handkerchief, automatically, like someone in a trance. "It's too much," he said.

"I didn't know Millicent was ill," said Quist.

"She's been on the critical list for several months now. Jerry wanted it kept quiet. Not the best kind of public relations for a guy up to his neck in an entertainment project, would you say? And it was a private sorrow, Julian. Let it be known and the worst of the media creeps wouldn't let it alone."

"Do you have any idea who might have had it in enough for Jerry to pull off that disaster this morning?"

Martin shrugged. "A crazy kid tries to kill the President of the United States just to attract the attention of an actress he's never met. In Jerry's case, it could be someone he'd never dream of—a cameraman whose work he didn't like, an actor who didn't get a part, any one of a hundred people he might have slighted without knowing it."

"You don't think it was aimed at Buck Williams?"

Martin shrugged again. "For just as crazy reasons, I suppose. But when a torpedo sinks the ship you're on you're not likely to spend time wondering if it was meant for someone else."

"You think Buck's wife is wondering if it was meant for someone else?"

"You're talking to the wrong guy, Julian," Martin said. "My ship's gone down, and the captain I've been serving all my adult life is going down with it. Whether it was meant for anyone else is meaningless to me right now."

"Can you make an educated guess who *might* have dreamed up this horror for *Jerry?*"

Martin fitted his glasses back on. "Starting ten minutes after that bomb went off, they've been at me," he said. "People who have given Jerry credit to make his film wanting to know when and how they're going to be paid. Everyone's first thought is for the dollars that

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aren't going to be there. I haven't time for educated thoughts about anything except how to stall creditors."

The door opened and a uniformed nurse said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Martin, but Mr. Jardine says to prepare a formal announcement."

Martin froze. "Mrs. Jardine—?"

"She's dead."

"God." Martin went grey and hurried from the room, leaving Julian alone with the nurse.

"This wasn't unexpected, I take it, Miss—?"

"Sterling," the nurse said. "No. She's been in a coma for the last eight or ten hours. Mercifully, I might say." She searched Julian's face. "This isn't a day Mr. Jardine is likely to forget, is it?"

There wasn't really anything anyone could do to console the bereaved, Julian thought. Millicent Jardine hadn't even known that her son had been murdered before she died. At this moment hundreds of people must be trying to reach Lisa Williams to offer sympathy and help. Quist knew he would only be part of a tidal wave of well-wishers if he tried to get to her. Dan Garvey would already have done what could be done in that direction. There was only one way Quist thought he might be of practical help. His connections in the world of show business might produce some answers to the questions the police must be asking.

"There are probably five thousand rumors circulating in Hollywood already," he told Mark Kreevich in Mark's office at Homicide. "Those who think it was meant for Buck Williams are making their guesses, those who think it was meant for Jerry Jardine are making theirs."

"And we need an army to collect those rumors, sift through them, and come up with one grain of fact," Kreevich said. "You want to see it happen?"

"See what happen?"

"They were shooting a feature picture when it happened, remember?" Kreevich said. "I've got it on film, the whole bloody thing, from start to finish. Pull those blinds over there and I'll show you."

Quist had noticed the projector and screen in the far corner of the office. Now, in the darkened room, he saw it all—the towers of Manhattan, the East River Drive, the jeep suddenly emerging from a stream of traffic and heading at high speed up the Drive. Buck Williams was at the wheel with the boy behind him pointing and waving—then the terrible explosion that lifted the jeep into the air

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and shattered it and the two people in it. The camera had kept grinding on to show the wreckage drifting down, like black chunks of rain.

"They had no chance at all," Quist muttered when the screen went blank.

"Is that all you saw?" Kreevich asked. "I looked for someone who could have thrown the bomb at them. It wasn't possible. It had to be planted in the jeep before they started. —Only it wasn't."

"How do you know?"

"As a matter of course, the jeep was examined before the actors boarded it by a man on Buck Williams' staff, a longtime friend and a very efficient mechanic. He checked out the jeep and stayed by it until Buck got behind the wheel with the boy behind him. There was no bomb."

"This mechanic could be lying."

"I don't think so," Kreevich said. "Lisa Williams swears by him. And a policeman who was there to keep rubberneckers and fans from getting in the way was curious about the security and asked this guy—name of Johnson—why such a careful search. 'You got a million-dollar property, you make damn sure nothing goes wrong, no matter how small,' Johnson told the cop."

"So there wasn't any bomb in the jeep and no one threw one at it. And yet it blew up."

Kreevich nodded.

"The only answer is that one of the actors carried it on with him, knowingly or not."

"Buck Williams a suicide?" Quist said. "No way. Rich, a happy marriage, riding the top of the wave professionally—never!"

"And Hugo Van Cortlandt had everything in the world his mother's money could buy him. I'm told he hero-worshipped Buck Williams. And Buck persuaded Jardine to let the boy have the part in the film."

"The bomb had to be bigger than a pocket watch, didn't it?" Quist asked. "Neither Buck nor the boy could have carried it on without knowing it, could they?"

"Look at the film again," Kreevich said.

It was on the screen once more, the racing jeep, Buck Williams at the wheel, the boy standing behind him, waving and pointing.

"The boy is wearing some kind of a knapsack on his back," Kreevich said.

The jeep blew up again and Kreevich turned off the projector.

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"I haven't been able to get a look at the script they were shooting," Kreevich said, "but an assistant director told me the story calls for the character Buck was playing to pick up a hitchhiker, the part the boy was playing. The knapsack was part of his hitchhiker's costume."

"You think the bomb was planted in the knapsack?" Quist asked.

"A guess," Kreevich said.

"Someone got at it in the actor's dressing room?"

"This wasn't on a sound stage, Julian. There was no dressing room. The boy dressed at home, Buck dressed at his hotel. They were both driven in a company limousine to the spot where the scene was to be shot."

"Wouldn't Hugo have noticed the knapsack was heavier than usual?"

"If he'd ever worn it before," Kreevich said.

"Did someone help him dress at Jardine's house?"

"Probably."

"Bomb set off by remote control—"

"Or a time-clock arrangement," Kreevich said. "They knew in advance exactly when the scene would be shot. Arrangement made with the city to clear the Drive for them for a certain time. It had to be then or never. Everyone from Jardine, the director, down to the last assistant cameraman and crew member knew exactly when that time was to be."

"So the bomber had to be someone in Jardine's household who helped the boy dress for the day's work."

"It's not easy to get questions answered up there," Kreevich said. "First the bombing, and then Mrs. Jardine's death. Hugo wore his own bluejeans, shirt, and shoes. A wardrobe guy came in the limousine that picked the boy up and checked on the clothes—the colors and fit—and the knapsack, which had been delivered to Hugo the night before. Just before they shot the scene, the wardrobe guy helped him strap on the knapsack, saw nothing peculiar about it, and watched him climb into the jeep."

"So the bomb could have been planted in it before it was delivered to Hugo the night before. Or in the Jardine house during the night?"

"Something like that," said Kreevich. "If this disaster was meant to destroy Jardine, the bomber could, quite logically, be part of his household staff."

"So what's the problem? You go up there and find out who helped

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the boy, who delivered the knapsack, who had access to it while it was there."

"In good time," Kreevich said. "Right now I've got to check with the bomb squad. They may have found out what set off the bomb. If there's an answer to that, I may be able to ask more intelligent questions at Jardine's."

It wasn't his problem, Quist told himself as he left Kreevich's office. He didn't owe Jerry Jardine any special services. The boy was beyond help. He didn't owe any special services to Buck Williams or his wife Lisa, either. They were nice people he knew casually. By now Lisa would be buried in good deeds and wishes from people who had loved her and her husband. And yet he found himself irresistibly drawn toward the Beaumont, New York's top luxury hotel, where Buck and Lisa had been staying. Lisa might know some details that would help. There might be gossip she'd gotten from Buck about someone who had it in for him or Jardine. She might want to talk about it.

Just inside the lobby, Quist encountered Mark Haskell, the public-relations man for the hotel, an old acquaintance. Quist and Lydia often dined at the Beaumont or stopped in at the Trapeze Bar for an after-theater drink.

Haskell gestured toward the street. "All those idiots are waiting to get a glimpse of the grieving widow. We managed to sweep them out of the lobby, but they keep hanging around."

"I came by to see if I could be of any use to Lisa. I tried to call her on the phone but your switchboard wouldn't put me through."

"Our switchboard started to light up like a Christmas tree about five minutes after the bombing this morning. We had to protect her. But I can get you through if you want."

A few minutes later, from Haskell's office, Quist was connected with Lisa Williams.

"I don't know what to say to you, love," he said. "But I want you to know I'm here in the hotel and available if I can be of any help at all."

Her voice sounded under pressure but controlled. "Mr. Haskell can get you past the security people. I'd appreciate it if you would come up. There's something I think you should know."

Suite 14B was one of the most elegant and expensive accommodations in the Beaumont. Only the best would have been reserved

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for a star of Buck Williams' caliber. The hall outside the suite was crowded with uniformed police and hotel security people. Quist was admitted by a maid who had been assigned to help protect Lisa.

Lisa had been a beautiful girl when she'd married Buck more than twenty years ago. Now she was a handsome woman in her early forties. She came quickly across the living room to Julian and for a few moments he held her tightly in his arms. Neither of them spoke. What was there to say? Looking past her, Quist saw that she wasn't alone. Standing by the fireplace at the far end of the room was a distinguished-looking grey-haired man. Lisa turned to him.

"Jason Carver says he knows you, Julian."

"Quist and I have had mutual clients over the years," the man said.

Jason Carver, Quist knew, was one of the best estate lawyers in the country. Buck Williams would have had only the best to handle his financial affairs.

"You said there was something I should know," Quist said to Lisa.

"It's Dan Garvey," Lisa said. "He was here this morning, like the good friend he was of Buck's. But, Julian, he was so angry it frightened me. He took off from here like a wild man, promising he'd find Buck's murderer and deal with him himself."

"He cared a lot for Buck," Quist said.

"You should find him, Julian, and sit on him until he starts to make sense."

"It's a matter for the police," said Carver.

"I've just come from Homicide," Quist told them. "Lieutenant Kreevich, who's overseeing the investigation, is an old friend. They think the bomb may have been planted in a knapsack Hugo Van Cortlandt was wearing."

"I'm glad Buck never knew what happened to him," Lisa said. "Buck got him the job that cost him his life. He thought he was doing him a favor. Hugo knew there was a part for a boy in the film and he wanted it, desperately."

"All he had to do was ask his stepfather," Quist said.

"He did, and got a flat no." Lisa was frowning. "Hugo and Jerry didn't get along very well. Hugo never quite accepted Jerry as a father, and I guess Millicent was too ill to straighten things out between them."

"You know about her? That—?"

Lisa nodded. "At least she doesn't have to face what's happened."

"Tell me more about how Hugo got this role he wanted."

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"He pleaded with Buck to help him persuade Jerry. Buck thought Hugo was just right in appearance and quality for the part. He didn't have to act anything, he just had to be himself. He managed to convince Jerry and in the end Hugo got the part—" Her voice started to lose control.

Carver put a hand on her shoulder. "What you said, that the bomb may have been carried onto the jeep in the boy's backpack—"

"The jeep had been inspected right up to the last minute," Quist explained.

"People are guessing that Buck was the target. But this suggests another possibility, Quist."

"Oh?"

"That the boy was the target—that Buck was expendable. Millicent Jardine was one of the richest women in the world. The rich often have enemies without even knowing it."

Quist turned to Lisa. "Do you have any idea where Dan was heading?"

Lisa shook her head.

"Your friend Garvey simply said he was out to get someone," Carver told Julian. "He didn't suggest where or how."

Later Quist was asked over and over by friends and curious reporters why he didn't go directly to Lieutenant Kreevich when he got his idea. The reason was that all he had *was* an idea, suggested by Jason Carver, without a shred of evidence or proof. The bomb, Carver suggested, could have been meant for Hugo Van Cortlandt—the boy hadn't been simply the carrier of the bomb, he had been the bomb's target. Julian wasn't about to yank Kreevich away from the bomb squad and its investigation to report guesses or speculations.

The cop at the front door remembered Quist. "The word is 'no visitors,' " he said. "But since they saw you before, I'll send your name in."

A moment or two later Julian found himself in the entrance hall. He was directed by a manservant to the library, where he found Frank Martin seated at a desk in a corner of the room, a stack of papers in front of him.

"You must be psychic, Quist," he said. "I've been trying to reach you."

"Why?"

"To help us with some kind of press release on Mrs. Jardine. As one of the richest women in the world, she's public property in a

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way. Heiress to the Hubert Maxwell fortune. Van Cortlandt, her first husband, very much in the public eye before he was killed in the Grand Prix. Hugo, her natural heir, killed in this insane bombing this morning. It's beyond my powers to do an intelligent piece for the press and you're an expert at that kind of thing."

"Where does the Maxwell money go now?" Quist asked.

A nerve twitched on Martin's right cheek. "As far as I know, Jerry inherits. It would have gone to the boy—it was set up that way by his late grandfather. Trick of fate, I guess you'd call it. If the boy predeceased Millicent, she was then free to dispose of her money and she willed it to Jerry if that happened."

Quist felt a sudden tightening of every nerve in his body. "So in the end it isn't a financial disaster for Jardine?"

Martin shrugged. "The way the dice rolled, I guess."

"So the question is, who rolled the dice?"

"The gods play their games in strange and unpredictable ways," Martin said. "When that bomb went off, Jerry was destroyed financially—bankrupt, beaten. Two hours later he's bailed out a hundred times over." He looked at Julian as through a fog. "Why did you come back here, Quist?"

"The police believe the bomb was planted in the knapsack Hugo was wearing," Quist said.

Martin put his pen down on the desk and stood up.

"I was told that the boy dressed for this morning's filming here—which made me wonder if someone could have placed the bomb in the knapsack here in this house."

"*Who*, for God sake?" Martin asked. "And why?"

"I think you just told me," Quist said. "Jardine knew Millicent was dying. If she died before Hugo, hundreds of millions of dollars would go to the boy. Jardine had to kill him before Millicent died, and it didn't matter how or who died with him."

At that, Jerry Jardine walked in. "I guess we've heard enough, haven't we, Frank?" He was holding a handgun, aimed at Julian's chest.

"You'll never get away with it," Julian said, frozen where he was, sure he was going to die. Then he fought back a shout of warning.

Dan Garvey had charged into the room. He threw a blind-side tackle into Jardine. The gun went off but the shot went wild as the two men tangled together on the floor. Martin started forward but Quist grabbed him and threw him aside.

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Then Kreevich was in the doorway, pointing a police special. "All right, Jardine, that does it!"

A gun went off again—Jardine's gun.

Quist didn't want to look, but he did. Dan Garvey was struggling onto his hands and knees, and then pushed himself onto his feet. Jerry Jardine lay still, a flood of blood streaming from the side of his head. "The crazy bastard shot himself," Garvey said.

"Dan made a guess," Kreevich said. "We went to Millicent Jardine's lawyer to find out the facts about her will. What was your cut to be, Martin?"

Frank Martin had crumpled back into his desk chair. "You'll find out sooner or later," he said. "I was a demolition expert in the Vietnam War. Jerry had me make the bomb and set it in place. A clock timer set it off, if you don't already know. Jerry, directing the film, could make certain they'd be exactly where he wanted them to be when it went off."

"Killing Buck Williams was a part of it?" Kreevich asked.

Martin nodded. "It had to appear he was the target—or that Jerry was the target. Not the boy."

"He cut it pretty fine, didn't he? A matter of a few hours."

"You may not believe it," Martin said, "but he cared for Millicent."

"He certainly didn't care about the boy."

"He hated the little bastard—who also hated him," Martin said.

"And you were to be set up for life, I suppose."

Martin's smile was bitter. "Almost anyone can be bought for a few million dollars."

"I think," Quist said, "I would like to get out of here into a little fresh air."

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THE JURY BOX
by ALLEN J. HUBIN

After the deaths of certain authors, or after they lost interest in their popular crime-fiction characters, other writers have leaped to continue the series. Doyle and Holmes have received the most attention, with dozens of pastiches on record and more arriving each year. But the list of such series continuations by later authors is long. Among numerous examples are Blackshirt (created by Bruce Graeme; continued by his son, Roderic Graeme), Raffles (E. W. Hornung; Barry Perowne, David Fletcher), the Saint (Leslie Charteris; various authors), Mike Shayne (Brett Halliday; various authors), James Bond (Ian Fleming; Robert Markham, John Gardner), Albert Campion (Margery Allingham; her husband, Youngman Carter), Uncle Abner (Melville Davisson Post; John F. Suter), and Bulldog Drummond (H. C. McNeile; Gerard Fairlie). Results of these enterprises have been mixed, and dedicated fans of the original characters have sometimes rejected the "imitations" with horror.

Rex Stout and his Nero Wolfe are venerated to such a degree that any attempt to revive Wolfe and Archie Goodwin is certainly frought with great peril. Undaunted, Robert Goldsborough, a newspaper and magazine editor in Illinois, offers us *Murder in E Minor* (Bantam, $13.95). After the suicide of Orrie Cather, one of the freelancers Wolfe used frequently over the years, Nero withdrew from active investigations for two years; Archie, relegated to keeping orchid-plant records, was driven to distraction. Perhaps only the murder of a man, now conductor of the New York Symphony, who had saved Wolfe's life in Montenegro could induce Nero once again to take an interest in crime. A debt is owed and must be paid. Only one person can be the killer, apparently. Wolfe's client —and, in due course, Wolfe— believes otherwise. I think on balance this is quite a competent tale in the Stout pattern. I certainly enjoyed it: as far as I'm concerned, so long as Goldsborough at least maintains this standard he can go on writing about Wolfe for years to come.

A very impressive first mystery novel—one that would stand out even if by an established writer—is *The Latimer Mercy* (St. Martin's, $12.95) by English journalist and editor Robert Richardson. The setting is theatre and church, in the city of Vercaster. Augustus Maltravers has written a monologue on biblical themes, which is presented by actress Diana Porter to launch the Vercaster Arts Festival. It's a resounding success, but his friend Diana shortly disappears. Murder is suspected, particularly in view of the ghastly public acts of the supposed murderer. And what, if anything, can this have to do with

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the theft of a Sixteenth Century Bible from Vercaster Cathedral? Intense characterization, dynamic plot, high involvement; I'll be surprised if this gets overlooked by awards committees.

Irving Weinman's first novel, *Tailor's Dummy* (Atheneum, $13.95), has a worthy plot, useful characters, and an accomplished style. But the author's unrestrained revels in extraneous sex would have made this a piece of paperback sleaze to be sniggered over in back rooms not many years ago, and here make it a misguided waste. NYC's Inspector Lenny Schwartz, relegated to administrivia because of difficulties with a bribe (he took it), finally has a case: the execution-style killing of a posh art dealer. The dead man was a homosexual, known for heavy tastes, so Lenny looks in that direction. And with has wife, an art historian, he looks also into the business end of the matter. Peril lies either way: a polished and psychopathic killer-for-hire awaits the inspector.

The Search by Robert Mayer (Doubleday, $16.95) is aptly titled, for it's largely about weak, lost, searching people. It's also about the search for a murderer. James Rood is a renowned photographer, located in Santa Fe, New Mexico. He's insisting that his unborn child be killed, to the devastation of his relationship with his mistress, and he's on call to the CIA. A cry from a little boy comes over the shortwave radio: he's crushed in a truck with his father, who's not moving any more. A massive search is mobilized. Rood has some nasty thoughts about this episode. A sixty-five-year-old priest, a man of peace and good works, is lured out onto the desert and shot to death. Rood comes to have ideas about this, too. All the while a scientist at Los Alamos Laboratories seethes and bubbles and plans in his demented mind. No heroes here, just fragile people, and Mayer brings them together with feeling and suspense.

"C" Is for Corpse (Henry Holt, $14.95) is the first of Sue Grafton's three novels about Kinsey Millhone to come my way. Kinsey is twenty-eight, a divorcee, a private investigator in Santa Teresa, ninety-five miles north of L.A. Here a young man, scarred and beset with memory loss from a car accident he thinks no accident, asks her help. She meets the wealthy, desperate people in his family, in his social circle. Her emotions are engaged as she tries to help Bobby remember what he knew before the accident that made him dangerous to someone. Kinsey is an interesting, complex person—a bit crude perhaps but not unlikeable—and *Corpse* is well told.

In *A Little Darling, Dead* (St. Martin's, $14.95), Jack S. Scott assigns Inspector Pete Parsons two cases: a dead schoolgirl (possibly murdered) and another death (clearly murder). The girl proves to have a collection of expensive jewelry, legally purchased. She seems also to have been extensively active sexually. Her parents are devastated. Parsons inquires at the girl's school, among her friends. Nervousness is observed, not just

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among teenagers. Scott tells a good story effectively in his chatty, ironic style.

William Murray's second novel about Lou (Shifty) Anderson, Los Angeles magician and horse handicapper, is *The Hard Knocker's Luck* (Viking, $14.95), a fine piece of work. This one has much to do with horses and the art of wagering thereon. It has also to do with a foxy lady who talks of horses and mourns her straying husband. Anderson consoles her. And it has to do with Freddie Chambers, a painter and restorer of art works who is unaccountably well heeled of late and betting on every four-legged loser in sight. Chambers seems to have something worth killing for. You may find all this a little less mysterious than Shifty does, but that won't lessen your enjoyment.

Derek Thyrde returns in Bertie Denham's second suspense novel, *Two Thyrdes* (St. Martin's, $15.95), and a satisfying meld of current and WWII intrigue it is. Derek's father, a casualty of war whom Derek never knew, participated in efforts to identify a traitor in the British bosom, necessarily one of eight members of the "1944 Club," which has met annually for dinner since that year. Derek himself, short of money and on the brink of political opportunity, is accused of theft; the actual thief must be one of the present eight (comprising four originals and four sons). In alternating chapters, we follow the unraveling of the two skeins. Cleverly plotted, Mr. Denham.

Clinical psychologist Jonathan Kellerman's first novel, *When the Bough Breaks*, was truly impressive and won the Edgar for best first mystery novel of 1985. His second, also featuring L.A. psychologist Alex Delaware, is *Blood Test* (Atheneum, $14.95). This, too, is exceptionally well done. A five-year-old boy has cancer, probably treatable, but the parents and oversexed daughter, psychological disaster-areas all, reject the advice of doctors, take the child out of the hospital, and disappear. The boy's need for medication is desperate, and police and Dr. Delaware try to find him. Repeatedly crossing the family's trail are the tracks of a commune and its lawyer-dropout guru. A tangle of relationships, most of them sick, depraved, deadly, remains to be sorted out. Suspense almost unbearable here.

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"Q"

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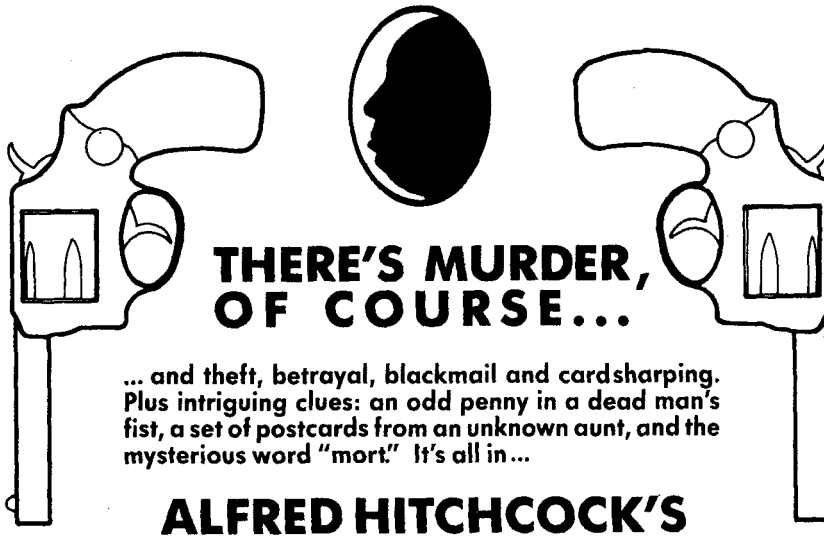

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a *NEW* short story by

THOMAS ADCOCK

The doctor examined the body there in the garden and after a minute or two pointed to a blue-black welt on Willis's left ankle. "He's full of venom more than likely," he said. "No, sir," said Vivian. "Somebody's gone and hexed my man . . ."

THROWN-AWAY CHILD

by THOMAS ADCOCK

The little room in back where Perry stayed was "nothin' but a damn slum the way that no-'count keeps it," according to his Aunt Vivian. She had a long list of complaints about her nephew, most of which were shared by most people who knew him. But she and Perry were still family and so she loved him, too, in a quiet and abiding way.

Vivian lived in the rest of the place, a wooden cottage of four narrow connected rooms built up on hurricane stilts, with a high pitched roof, batten shutters over the windows, and French louvered doors on either end. The front steps were scrubbed every morning with a ritual mixture of steaming hot water and brick dust to keep evil spirits at bay. The back steps led from Perry's squalor to a tiny fenced garden of thick grass, a chinaberry tree, and a lilac bush. In appearance and infirmity, the cottage was nearly the same as the forty or so others crowded into a rut-filled dirt lane between lower Tchoupitoulas Street and a levee almost crumbled away from years of flood and neglect.

The neighborhood was one of many that tourists in the city were not encouraged to visit, a neighborhood where pain and fears from the hard past overlapped a generally despairing present—a haunted part of New Orleans, some claimed. Which was why, among other

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customs, the front steps were washed down with brick dust every day.

On most afternoons, the people in the lane would go to the levee for the coolness of the river breezes or to catch themselves a dinner of Mississippi catfish. There, ancient Creole men and widow ladies—with *tignons* covering their hair, the Madras handkerchiefs favored by voodoo women with seven points carefully twisted heavenward—would talk until dusk of the old days and the old ways.

Long ago, Vivian and her husband had been terribly proud of the cottage. It was truly theirs, no thanks to any of the banks or mortgage companies—bought and paid for with the saved-up wages of a yard man and a cleaning woman whose ancestors had once been shackled to posts in the public squares above Canal Street and sold as slaves. But on a sunny day in March of 1948, Vivian and Willis Duclat took title to a little wood cottage and became the first of their families to own their own home.

It was a long way up in a perilous, hostile world and Willis and Vivian were pleased to be gracious about their ascent. Almost everyone else in the lane shared generously in their reflected joy. One who did not was a tall, sour-faced woman next door to the Duclats, a spinster known as Miss Toni. "Ain't goin' to be no comfort to you or the rest of us down here to be buyin' your own place when it's the last one that ain't owned yet by Theo Flower. Theo's wants the whole lane bad and he means to get it, one way'r other. He knows the mysteries, so that's how he'll get you yet—one way'r other."

Vivian said to pay no mind to Miss Toni. "She only says those poisonous things 'cause she's lonesome and miserable."

The pride of the Duclats was brief.

Toward the end of '48, the parish tax assessor came calling. He smiled quite a bit and seemed genuine. He shook hands with Willis, same as he'd shake a white man's hand. And he addressed Vivian properly as Mrs. Duclat. The assessor was there to explain how he had some important papers for signing, papers that would bring paving and curbing and a sewer hook-up. The Duclats didn't understand quite all of the small print on the man's papers, but since he'd been so respectful Willis and Vivian trusted him and signed where it said "Freeholder." Then by Christmas of '49, when they'd fallen impossibly far behind on the special surcharges for modern conveniences levied against them by those important papers, the Duclats' home was seized by the sheriff and put up for sale in tax-forfeiture court.

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At the auction there was only one bidder—the Church of the Awakened Spirit, in the person of its pastor, The Most Reverend Doctor Theophilus Flower. At last, Theo Flower and his church owned every last cottage in the lane. Pastor Flower wasted no time. He called on the Duclats the very day he put down the cash money to retire the delinquent surcharges, plus the customary plain brown envelope full of money for his friend, the smiling tax assessor.

Pastor Flower drove straightaway from the courthouse to the Duclats' place in his big white Packard motorcar, one of the first postwar models off the Detroit assembly lines. When the neighbors saw the Packard roll in from Tchoupitoulas Street, they went to their homes and shut the doors until they knew Pastor Flower had gone away.

In the parlor of the newly dispossessed Duclats, Theo Flower was courtly and sympathetic. The pastor had no need for meanness when he bought somebody's home out from under them—the law made it all so easy and polite.

"Now, I know you can understand that our church has many missions," he said in his deep, creamy preacher's cadence, "and that among them is providing what we can in the way of housing for our poor and unfortunate brothers and sisters."

Willis sat in a caneback chair in a sort of shock, still as a stone while Pastor Flower talked. He didn't appear to hear anything. He'd hidden from his wife for days before the court sale so that he could cry, and now his eyes looked like they might rust away with grief. Vivian sat next to him and held his big calloused hands. She looked at the floor, ashamed and resigned, and listened carefully to Theo Flower.

"I surely don't want to see fine people like you having noplace to live. You see, though, how we must serve our members first? Now, I've been giving this predicament of yours a lot of my thought and some of my most powerful prayer and I do believe I have come upon a solution—"

When at last Pastor Flower was finished, he collected twenty dollars on account toward the first year's tithe to the Church of the Awakened Spirit. And the church's two newest members, Vivian and Willis Duclat, signed some important papers their new pastor happened to have with him, pressed inside the red-leather Bible he always carried. They signed where it said "Tenant."

After scratching his name to Theo Flower's lease, Willis rose from his chair and crossed the room angrily, tearing himself away from

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Vivian's grip on his shirt. He stood towering over the preacher and his black eyes came alive again. Duclat's huge hands, made hard and heavy from his work with shovels and stone and earth, clenched into dark fists. His voice sounded as if it were a thousand years old.

"I ain't no educated man," he said to Flower, "and I ain't well spoken like you. But I ain't simple, neither, and I can sure as hell figure you just done somethin' crooked here. I'm goin' to think on this, then I'm goin' to figure some way to bring you down for what you done to me and my wife, and prob'ly other poor folks besides."

The Most Reverend Doctor Theophilus Flower only smiled. When he did, Vivian saw a flash of gold at the back of his dark-brown lips. Then Flower stood up, no match in physique to Willis. He folded the lease into his Bible and answered the big angry man with the clenched fists: "It won't do to talk like that, brother. I know you're a troubled man today and I'm sorry for you, truly. But you'd best not take an adversary's tone against a man who knows the mysteries like I do. You understand what I mean, don't you, brother Willis?"

Willis understood only too well. Since he was a boy, he'd heard of Theo Flower's abilities, how he could call forth the dead from beyond, how he could "fix" an enemy, how his power came from the evil fangs of river snakes. Willis felt something cold on his neck, something like a wet wind.

Then the pastor drove off in his Packard. And later, in the silent night, Willis awoke from a nightmare with a violent fever and pains that shot through his chest and neck.

Willis never worked another day, nor did he sleep well. Then three months into the new year of 1950, on the very day that Perry was born to his younger sister, Willis Duclat dropped dead.

It happened despite his precautions. Convinced that mortal danger lay waiting in the alleyway in the form of water moccasins or copperheads that would sometimes slither up from the levee, Willis had begun a new daily protective routine. He would mix a batch of quicklime and cayenne pepper into the boiling water left over from scrubbing the front steps and pour the potion in two parallel lines along the inside of the fence that enclosed his garden. One of the old *voodooiennes* assured him he would be safe now, back as well as front.

Just before he died, Willis was sitting on a step out back, smoking a morning pipe of tobacco. Vivian was on her way to a mansion on St. Charles Avenue, where she had a job minding three children, cleaning some, and cooking for a doctor who ate far too much. Across

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the river, meanwhile, in the parish of Algiers, a midwife pulled an infant boy into the world from between the legs of his very young and frightened mother.

Willis's left leg dangled off the side of the pine steps and his bare foot swung back and forth, toes brushing through the dewy grass that he'd coaxed into growing from muddy soil. Then suddenly, his body convulsed with a spasm so overwhelming it threw him to the ground, where he twisted around for a few seconds in mute torture before his heart stopped. Vivian found him when she returned home in the afternoon. He was sprawled on his back in the grass, his face covered with bits of blossoms, the white and purple petals that fell from the chinaberry tree.

She ran to a confectionary shop where there was a public telephone and rang up the doctor's house. Her employer drove over right away, breaking the speed limit even though Vivian told him that Willis was dead and already cold. The doctor examined the body there in the garden and after a minute or two pointed to a blue-black welt on Willis's left ankle. "He's full of venom more than likely," he said.

"No, sir," said Vivian. "Somebody's gone and hexed my man."

The lane was never paved, nor was it ever so much as named. And through the decades, Theo Flower bought up hundreds more ragged neighborhoods in New Orleans, building up his church membership and the sort of respectability money from any source whatever buys in the entrenched power structure of a southern town.

Along about the middle 1970s, the federal government mandated sewer hook-ups for even the lowliest neighborhoods in any city that expected revenue-sharing funds. So New Orleans obliged people like Vivian Duclat, finally. For his part, Theo Flower hiked her rent since the property would become more valuable with the addition of a modern convenience.

In July of 1983, Perry Duclat was paroled out of the Louisiana State Prison at Angola after serving half of a seven-year sentence for grand theft—auto. He'd been convicted of "borrowing" a Rolls-Royce that belonged to the doctor where his Aunt Vivian worked. In his defense, Perry told the judge, "I was helpin' out my aunt one day at the big house and the man was out of town for the weekend and there was that nice big car of his just sittin' in the garage goin' nowhere. So naturally I borrowed it. How else is a man like me ever goin' to have any style in his life? I put it back right where I found

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it and I never hurt it one little bit, no sir." Perry had borrowed many things in the past, many of them yet to be returned, so the judge threw the book at him and lectured him on how he'd probably never amount to anything with that sort of thieving attitude. The defendant only smiled.

And even so, even though the doctor told her she could never work at his house again, Vivian took Perry in when he was released from Angola with nowhere to go. She took him in because they were family, no matter what; because he was born on that terrible day her husband died; because in the years he'd been at Angola he'd taken on such a strong resemblance to Willis.

Every day but Sunday, Vivian would get up early in the morning and go off to work someplace. Perry would get up right after that and attend to the chores, which included keeping his aunt's part of the cottage meticulously clean and scrubbing down the front steps because she believed most of the old myths even if he didn't. By ten o'clock or so, he would be back in his own room watching television.

In the three months he'd been there, Perry's room had become wall-to-wall beer cans, hundreds of them, under a film of cigarette ash. He would light cigarettes and leave them burning on the windowsill or at the edge of the dresser. Holes were burnt into the sheets of his bed, where he sat day after day watching television game shows, talk shows, soap operas, meaningless news and witless comedies and endless commercials on a portable black-and-white set with a wire coathanger for an antenna. He liked to crush the cans after draining them, then he'd toss them aside, anywhere. Mostly, he drank Dixie beer, in the white cans with red-and-yellow lettering, or Coors in the gold cans when he had a few dollars extra.

Some days he'd stroll down to the levee. But Miss Toni had whispered around that Perry was an escaped convict, so very few neighbors would have anything to do with him. The old-timers talked to him, though, especially the widows in their *tignons,* garrulous old magpies always happy to pass along the legends that meant everything to them and practically nothing to the disrespectful younger generation.

Sometimes he would tend his late uncle's garden, where Miss Toni would spy on him from a window, ducking out of sight when he turned his face in the direction of her cottage. Or he'd sit on the back steps and read a book, which Miss Toni considered most highly suspicious. Perry had two big stacks of books in his room, one on the dresser and another that filled a corner, floor to ceiling. Some-

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times, too, he would write or draw in a tablet. About once a week, he would set off by foot all the way up to the library on Rampart Street.

But mostly Perry watched television, drank and smoked and drowned himself in thought. By noon, his eyes were boozy slits and his fingers stank of nicotine. He would watch the flickering idiot box until it went dark in the wee hours of the next day. He ate very little, though he did enjoy whatever his Aunt Vivian cared to cook or bake.

The two of them seldom talked. The chat was pleasant when Vivian spoke of Perry's late uncle, when she'd show him photographs of Willis or bring out a box of Willis's personal effects or tell Perry again about the day he died, what the doctor said, and how she thought that was "nothin' but medical yap." But then it would lead inevitably to the subject of Theo Flower and their chat would quickly become an argument loud enough for Miss Toni next door to hear every word of it, even without her big ears at the window.

"That nigger Flower's nothin' but an old-timey conjure man, nothin' but a slick and cussed old fraud who's got lots of little old ladies like you and Miss Toni and all scared out of your bloomers 'cause he's supposed to 'know the mysteries,' " Perry would say, eyes rolling and his voice heavy with sarcasm. "Haw! Y'all must be crazy."

To which Vivian would reply, her jowls quivering and a finger wagging up against her nephew's nose, "You best shut that sassy trap, boy! In the first damn place, we're beholden to Pastor Flower for this house we're in. And in the second damn place, well, let's just say you ain't lived near long enough to understand that precious little in this ol' world is actually what it seems to be."

She never quite told him so, but Vivian thrilled to her nephew's boisterous arrogance on the subject of Theo Flower. She supposed this might be a womanly fault of hers, enjoying the antagonisms of men at dispute where she was concerned, so she kept quiet. But when Perry would inveigh against Pastor Flower and his church, Vivian's eyes would mist over some, and through that prism of tears and remembrance she sometimes thought she was looking at her husband again. God bless poor black men for what little arrogance they dared show the world, she thought.

And Vivian didn't care a hoot whether Miss Toni heard them carrying on—which she did, and which she dutifully passed along

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nearly word-for-word to Pastor Flower himself, who maintained a pervasive interest in the personal lives of his home-indentured flock.

Perry's irreverence greatly disturbed Theo Flower. His unease was compounded by the unnerving physical resemblance he saw in Perry to the late Willis Duclat, who was about Perry's age when he died. Perry had taken to attending Sunday services of the Church of the Awakened Spirit and he sat right down center and never took his eyes off Pastor Flower, never registered any expression, just stood and sat down when requested. Never had a nickel for the collection plate. But there he sat anyway, unembarrassed, looking for all the world like Willis Duclat with his hot black eyes, taut olive-brown skin, high forehead, and straight hawklike nose. And those wide shoulders and thickly muscled arms, with big hammer hands folded in his lap.

"You better come do somethin' on that boy here," Miss Toni warned Pastor Flower on the telephone. "I tell you, I believe Perry's got some kind of trouble-makin' designs. I see him some days on those back steps, lookin' over to my place and starin' at me and wonderin' lord only knows what! Now, you know how we don't want no trouble here. We mean to keep in our houses, Pastor Flower. Please do somethin' on him!"

"Yes, yes. You're quite right," he told Miss Toni. "We will have to stop any trouble before it has a chance to begin."

Pastor Flower said yes to a drop of brandy in his coffee and asked permission to light a cheroot in Vivian Duclat's parlor besides. "Oh my, yes, go right ahead," she said. "My Willis was a smokin' man, you know. La, yes, he had to have that pipe of his from mornin' to midnight."

"Yes, I do recall that." Flower fired a sterling Tiffany lighter and touched the yellow-blue hiss of flame to the blunt end of his cigar. In the flash of light, Vivian saw again the gold crowns sparkle in the back of his mouth.

It was a Sunday twilight and a heavy blackness moved across the sky, overtaking what was left of the day and the week. Perry's television set droned from the back of the cottage.

"Sister Vivian, I come here to talk with you tonight on a delicate matter, one that causes me grave concern as to your welfare."

"What in the world can that be?" Vivian had enjoyed several drops of brandy in several cups of coffee before the pastor's call and her voice was thick.

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"Well, Sister Vivian, you know how people will talk. Many of your neighbors and friends are worried sick about your being all alone in this house with a man fresh out of prison, a man who I am told lives like some sort of wild animal in the back room of this cottage and who does nothing besides drink all day long. Now, I must worry about this for your sake—and for the sake of the church's property, after all."

Vivian touched her lips to hide a smile, which she thought Pastor Flower might well interpret as contemptuous. "I think I know maybe just one neighbor who'd gab like that and maybe she's over there listenin' now. Besides, if I had to worry 'bout ev'ry man 'round this neighborhood who'd ever been locked up, well, shoot, I'd be a mighty nervous old hag by now. So don't you worry none 'bout my nephew Perry, 'cause *I'm* sure not worryin' and you can tell Miss Toni the same if you want."

"Well, I only mean that your husband Willis was a hard-working, sober man and this Perry is a layabout. That is what I'm told." Flower coughed, then opened his red-leather Bible and spread it out on the parlor table. "You know very well from the scriptures how the devil works through wicked drinking men and other idle folks."

"Maybe I know that," Vivian said. "I do know for sure that the devil works through schemin' folks."

She poured herself another brandy and spotted it with coffee out of respect for the ministry. The ministry accepted one for himself.

"Let me set your mind at ease some, Pastor Flower. You should know a little of Perry's story, then maybe you'd understand him like I do. He's not a dangerous young man, no more than any other young man. He is sloppy, though. I'd be shamed to have you see where he stays.

"But look here, Perry's been bruised all through his life and them bruises come one right after the other. Ain't none of them healed up completelike, which is maybe why he lays 'round all the day long. Sometimes he shows some spunk, but if he's dog-tired from life most of the time, then I figure he's got the right.

"His mother—that would be Willis's sister—was nothin' but an ignorant teenage girl livin' over in Algiers in a shack all alone near a coalyard. How d'you s'pose a girl like that made out in the world? Well, you can imagine right enough. Anyway, she gets herself in the family way and then come runnin' over here with the baby, not even knowin' her brother Willis had passed on. Not that she'd care

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'bout that, mind you, not any more'n she cared for that baby she just plopped down on me.

"But I minded the child for a while and loved him. I named him, too, you know. Maybe I might have gone crazy without the baby 'round me to take my mind offa how Willis died like he did—" Her shoulders shook and she cried softly. Pastor Flower moved to comfort her with his hands, but she backed away from his touch.

"And you know all 'bout that," she said to Flower. "Anyway, Perry's mama went up to Chicago, so I heard. She wrote how fine she was doin' up North and how she wanted to send for Perry and all. But then the man who did her come by one day with a new wife and says he wants to take his baby and raise him up over to Algiers. That's what he did, took Perry away from me and wasn't nothin' I could do 'bout it.

"But Perry started comin' back here regular when he got older, just as soon as he could get by on the ferry on his own. An' I started noticin' how beat-up lookin' he was. I got it out of him what was goin' on over to his daddy's house. His daddy's lady would be all the time hittin' him, or burnin' him with cigarettes or shamin' him in front of the other little boys by comin' after him with a belt and whuppin' his head till he'd fall over bloody, then whuppin' some more until he messed his pants.

"I tol' his daddy all this when he would come for him to take him back, and that man said his boy was possessed 'cause he wouldn't never do nothin' right or what was told him. Then he finally put little Perry in a home someplace out in the country.

"Next I heard, Perry'd busted out of that home, which was more like some prison than a home, which it never had any right to be called, and he headed north lookin' for his mama. He found her, too. He come back and tol' me how she was nothin' but a whore and a dope addict, how she looked like death itself and didn't even know Perry was her kin.

"Well, he was right. Later on, we heard from some city health official up North how she was dead from heroin and askin' us did we know her birthday. They was so shocked to learn she was only thirty-six.

"Perry figured he'd better stay over with his father, else his daddy'd make trouble for me. But the man tossed him out soon's he showed up over there to Algiers.

"And so, you see, Perry's had trouble all the time in his life. What

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do you expect? He was nothin' but a thrown-away child. Least that's what he think of himself anytime he's away from here."

Pastor Flower folded his hands over his Bible. Vivian ran her fingers through her hair nervously. From the back of the house where Perry watched television came the added sound of a beer can popping open, an empty being crushed, then the clatter of it when it fell to the littered floor.

"I'm sorry for you, Sister Vivian, but I cannot stand by idly in this matter."

Her voice rising high, Vivian said, "What do you mean? Don't you be takin' my Perry away! Don't you be takin' another man from this place!"

"Quiet, woman!" Flower's voice thundered. There was stillness in the house. "What I shall do here is convene the spirits and consult the wisdom of the other side. I shall call out your own husband, Willis Duclat!"

Vivian shrieked and her cup and saucer crashed to the floor.

"Yes," Flower said, "I shall call out the spirit of Willis Duclat. He—and only he—shall guide us on the matter of your nephew!"

Pastor Flower closed his Bible and the sound of it echoed in the parlor. He stood up and moved to the door, put on his hat. "I shall request that everybody in this lane come to service next Sunday. You come, too, Sister Vivian. I know you wouldn't want to miss hearing your husband's voice."

The tall dark woman at the side of the altar began chanting in a low, melodious voice. She started in a *francais africaine* dialect—

"Danse Calinda, boudoum, boudoum!
Danse Calinda, boudoum, boudoum!"

Pastor Flower, in a scarlet robe covered with *gris-gris*—dolls made of feathers and hair, skins of snakes, bits of bone—rose from a pit beneath the altar in a great plume of white-and-grey smoke. Beaming at the congregants in front of him, he turned and knelt at the altar as the woman's chanting grew in volume and tempo. He rapped the floor and then lit the black crucifix-shaped candles. He turned again to face his flock and he picked up the chant himself, raising his arms, commanding all to join in the calling out of spirits from beyond life.

Bodies swayed in the pews of the Church of the Awakened Spirit and the chanting rolled in waves, the single line of African French pulsating stronger and stronger through the sanctuary and out the

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open door into the liquid air of a savagely hot, humid Sabbath morning in New Orleans. Hands kept time and feet moved from muffled accentuation to a steady, rhythmic pounding.

Vivian Duclat, tears streaming down her face, for she had slept little during her week of anticipation, slapped her hands together determinedly and pounded her feet. She would hear her man, maybe she would even see her Willis—it didn't matter if the image were no more real than the times she thought she saw him in Perry's face. But what would Willis say of Perry? Would he send him away from her? Would Willis, too, throw the child away?

The tall dark woman stepped forward from the altar, moved her arms in an arc, and then switched to the Creole *patois* and to the uninhibited, throaty *canga*—

"Eh! Eh! Bomba, hen! hen!
Canga bafio, te,
Canga moune de le,
Canga do ki la,
Canga li!"

All joined the chant, their massed voices now storming and frenzied, so full of pathos and longing that it became impossible for anyone to remain free of the swing and the narcotic influence of the ancient words. Everywhere, people were prepared to believe it all, for the first time in many cases. The eyes of the young were no longer disrespectful, they were full of proper fright—the old-timers clung righteously to *gris-gris* charms of their own they'd brought along to the ceremony, their little "conjure balls" of black wax and bits of their own skin or bleached lizards in glass jelly jars or dried-up rooster hearts—the curious things they kept under lock and key at home, out of embarrassment and fear. Pastor Flower then began the dance of the Voudou, the leader.

He raised a bottle of brandy from the altar, dashed some of the liquid on each side of a brown bowl full of brick dust, then tossed back his head and took a long pull of the liquor. Then he started the slow hip shuffling, moved his feet backward and then forward, accelerating his movement up to the speed of the hypnotic *canga.* Without ceasing a single step of his dance, Flower poured the rest of the brandy into the bowl, then ignited it with his silver Tiffany lighter. The bowl flamed up high over the altar and still he danced the maddening *canga,* his powerful voice starting to rise up over the waning strength of all the others:

"I call out Willis Duclat! *Eh! Eh! Bomba, hen! hen!* I call out

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Willis Duclat! *Eh! Eh! Bomba, hen! hen!* Willis Duclat, speak through me—"

And suddenly, a tall young man covered in a brilliant red-and-black robe and hood ran crazily from somewhere in the back of the church, whirling and leaping and howling like a dervish until he reached the altar and a stunned Pastor Flower, who tripped and fell to his knees. The mysterious figure then vaulted over a railing and turned to the panicked congregation.

He tore the hood from his head, then the robe from his body, and stood before the assembly, his olive-brown body naked and oiled, his handsome face with the straight hawklike nose held high. Women screamed, but they did not avert their eyes, for the figure before them was a perfect masculine beauty. He raised his big-fisted hands and cried out over the nearly hushed church.

"I am Willis Duclat! I *am* Willis Duclat!"

And from the pew next to Vivian Duclat, a trembling Miss Toni stood up and screamed, "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, it's him! Oh la, it's him!"

The old ladies in *tignons* began fainting away and children squealed. Men stared, gape-mouthed, unable to help the women and the young. The tall, muscular, naked man grasped the shoulders of a terrified Theo Flower and lifted him several inches off the floor, then dropped him, crumpling, to a twitching heap. He turned again to the congregation and roared, "I, Willis Duclat, have come out!" He then knelt to Pastor Flower and whispered to him, "Time for you to blow town, chump, 'cause your number's up here."

He stripped Flower's robe of his *gris-gris,* which he dropped into the bowl of flaming brandy with elaborate gesticulation, so that all in the church could see he meant to destroy Theo Flower's control over them. "Be gone, the impostor's fakery!" he shouted.

He asked for silence. Then, he raised an arm and slowly directed it toward Miss Toni. "You," he said, "were in league with the impostor cowering at my feet. *You* placed the snake below the steps where you knew it would strike at me. You murdered me! It could have been no other way!"

Vivian sobbed.

"La, gawd-a-mercy!" Miss Toni screamed.

"Yes, yes, it was you! You and the impostor, this man called Theophilus Flower, who has oppressed you and cheated you all so cruelly for so many years since my death. It was you, Miss Toni, who killed me—to keep me from telling the truth that I do today!"

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"La, mercy! Mercy! Oh la, please!" Miss Toni fell to the floor, gasping and writhing and consumed with her guilt, which took the form of what the hospital would later diagnose as massive cerebral hemorrhage.

The man then tore a lock of hair from his head and held it high over him so all could see. "Today I have destroyed the power of the impostor Theophilus Flower, who was foolish enough to call me out. I tell you all now, you must shun him! This hair I hold is the most powerful *gris-gris* of all, the hair of one from beyond. I shall give it to someone who lives amongst you. I shall plant it in his head this very night as he sleeps, and there it will grow. I shall give the power to a thrown-away child, now a grown man in my image, so that you shall always know him!"

Then he disappeared into the pit below the altar.

"Thank you for receiving me here, sir. I would have understood your refusing me."

"Well, son, I look at it this way: you done the crime and you done the time. Now that's just so much water under the bridge, don't you know. B'sides, you intrigue the hell out of me."

"Yes, sir. Thank you again." He brushed lint from the top of his sharply creased charcoal-grey slacks, part of a Parisian suit he'd had made for him by a tailor at Gauchaux's on Canal Street.

The fat man offered him one of his cigars, which he declined in favor of a pipe that used to belong to his uncle. He lit the pipe and the fat man's cigar, too, with a sterling lighter that used to belong to Theo Flower.

"Tell me," the fat man said, "how's Vivian doin' for herself these days? We all loved her so much. Damn me for casting her out like I did just 'cause of what you did."

"Nice of you to inquire, Doctor. My aunt's doin' just fine now. She had a little excitement at church a while back, but she rested lots afterward and I was able to take care of her, now that I'm runnin' the church myself and all."

"She's welcome to come back to me any time, you know."

"Thanks again, Doctor. I'll send her callin', but, you know, she likes her retirement now and she's earned it, I'd say."

"Of course, of course." The doctor shook his fleshy head. "Damn me again! Perry, I'm sorta sorry now for havin' that judge crack down on you like he did."

"That don't matter much now. You might say you straightened

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me out by catchin' me. I had lots of time to think things through in prison. It was sorta strange, actually. All kinds of thought just sorta took over me, and I couldn't do much more'n think, day in and day out. Finally, I figured that I had to watch close for somethin' to come along that I could grab onto to make life good for me and my aunt for a change."

"Well, sounds to me like you did a fine piece of thinkin'. Just how'd you manage to take over the church, though? I mean, Theo Flower didn't strike me as a man ready to retire, like your old aunt. All of us fellows downtown were sorta surprised when he lit out for Baton Rouge like he did, without even a bye-you-well."

Perry smiled. "He had a change of spirit, you might say. Decided on greener pastures maybe. Anyway, I was around and interested in the church, you know. Spent lots of time readin' up on it and all and figurin' how I might make my contribution. So, the moment come along when I figured I might grab on, so I done that."

He smiled again. "Of course, I had to first prove to Pastor Flower that I understood all the mysteries of his divine work. He musta been satisfied, because he signed everything over to me."

Perry emptied the contents of a satchel onto a table between him and the doctor.

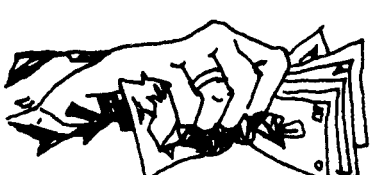
"It's all legal, I didn't have to steal anything—or 'borrow,' I should say." The doctor laughed and Perry went on. "See here, it's all the deeds and titles and bank accounts—everything. That's why I come to you, sir, for some guidance in handling this all."

"You can count on me, Perry."

"I'm so glad."

"Where do you want to start?"

"Well, first thing," Perry said, "I want all the cottages down there in that lane off Tchoupitoulas deeded over to the tenants, maybe for a dollar apiece, some token like that that'd be sure to make it legal, and then—"



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a *NEW* Mazie Bong story by

ED CONROW

The kid had suffered a strong blow. Beside him when Rafael found him was Jasper's old beat-up baseball bat, complete with lots of dirty adhesive tape around the handle—the same bat Jasper used when he managed to slug all of two hundred and fifty during his second year with the Flagstaff Boppers, the same he used at Lulu's to crush ice with or pound a nail into a squeaky floorboard . . .

A CASE OF DOUBLE VISION

by ED CONROW

"Jasper, stop your lollygagging and pay attention, you hear? Orders are stacking up. Git behind the griddle or we're all poorhouse bound." What an afternoon. We got a bus belonging to the Cucamonga Crackers of the California League parked out front, Lulu and me got twenty-one hungry baseball players on our hands, and even Rafael is goofing off listening to Buck Denefree and Jasper chewing the fat. *The* Buck Denefree.

Poked fifty-nine home runs for the Buccaneers during the 1959 season, if you can remember that far back—one shy of the mighty Bambino's record. Denefree was a peach-fuzzed wonder then. Now, after twenty-five years in professional baseball as a player, manager, and scout, he's a red-nosed, droopy-eyed, pot-bellied shell of his former self.

Jasper played two seasons as a shortstop for a semi-pro team up at Flagstaff too many years ago to remember, so he has something in common with Buck Denefree—not much, but something.

Finally, the ballplayers howled so loud for food Jasper wised up

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and heaped a bunch of hamburger patties on the griddle. Pretty soon it was like old times. "Mazie, pick up! Double-decker burger medium-rare. Thelma, where the blazes are you? Look alive—you got three grilled cheese cooling off and six bowls of my beautiful chili are getting ice cold!"

"Take a flying leap over a compost pile," retorted Thelma. She was ticked off because I rousted her out of the back room where she had settled down with a black-and-white soda heaped with whipped cream. With Thelma, life is just one big food break.

Jasper caught up on all his orders and the aroma of hamburgers, fried onions, chili, and burnt toast was like the nectar of the gods. I eyeballed one kid in a rear booth nibbling at his burger. All American type—clean cut, wearing a sweat-stained Crackers uniform with an exploding firecracker logo across the chest. "Food that bad, sonny? You can always eat at Greasy Roberto's downtown."

"What, ma'am?"

"I got a handle—my name's Mazie. Don't ask for a date, I'm booked ahead for the next fifty years. I should live so long. Refill on the java?"

He grinned. Pearly whites. "Now that you mention it, this burger is real sad. And the french fries are from Soggaroo City."

"Smother it with mustard. Heap on the catsup. What's your name? What position do you play?"

"Rufus Pendelton. Up to now, second base. After today—well, I guess I'm gonna get axed from the club."

"How come?" I fiddled with the salt and pepper shakers and did a few fancy hand swipes across the table top with a damp rag.

"I made two errors today—booted them for sure. I figured I was in the running with Luke Pfister for the second-sacker job, only he grabbed himself a home run and three ribbees—" I listen while the kid tells me he and his sweetie named Claudine were planning to tie the knot if he made the ball club, but find an excuse for a hasty retreat when the tears start oozing out.

"What's with heem?" asked Rafael, who's now in his second year at Phoenix College and doing quite well at that marvelous institution of learning. Someday I figure Rafael will be a well known brain surgeon, providing he doesn't wear out his eyeballs glomming so many girlie magazines.

"Rafael," I told him, "in this big world, some have it and some don't. The kid thinks he's gonna get cut from the Crackers' roster.

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He wants to tie the knot with his girl. No way he can manage that if he's zapped by Buck Denefree."

"He could always hustle tables." Rafael sidestepped and my short right jab to his ribs missed. He got himself lost gathering up dirty dishes while I went on about my business.

"Stand another cup, Brewster? What the hell—live daringly. Once you reach eighty, there's not much going for you. Hold out your cup and stop blabbing about what Vitamin E is doing for you. Man, when I think how I used to have to fight the stage-door johnnies off—"

The mighty Buck Denefree put in his two cents' worth as I started counting the tabs. "Bushwha—who you kidding, baby?"

I gave it right back. "Look, Mr. High and Mighty, you ain't what you used to be, either. Fifty-nine home runs during the nineteen fifty-nine season and fifty cents may just get you a seat on a city bus these days, if you know what I mean."

"Gotcha, Mazie. Jasper told me all about your five years in the Vegas lounge shows. A while back, eh?"

"Long ago, pretty far away. Say, Bucky baby, all I have here are twenty meal tickets. You came in with twenty-one ball players, including yourself. I'm missing one tab." Denefree looked around while I counted noses. "Zackerly—Madonna—Murphy—Ortiz—the Pendelton kid—Grazoni—Alton. All these tabs are signed. Looks like I'm missing one from Pfister. Hey, you guys—where's Pfister?"

"Who knows?"

"Who cares?"

Buck Denefree shrugged. "Wiseguys. Kids. I feel like a nursemaid. So who the hell knows where Pfister went to? I was out at the bus a while back. I know he's not snoozing out there. Look, Mazie—add three bucks to the bill. That ought to cover it. We got to get moving back to Phoenix, clean up, check out of the motel. We got a night flight back to Los Angeles. The season opens the day after tomorrow."

Jasper was at my elbow as I was making change for the hundred-dollar bill Denefree palmed me with. "Maybe your season won't open as planned," he mumbled.

I looked at him. Boy, was he off his feed. He looked sick. Out of a corner of my eye I could see Rafael talking at the wall phone in the kitchen. "He's calling the sheriff's office," Jasper muttered. "We got a baseball player out back with a banged-up skull. Number thirty-six on his uniform."

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Buck looked startled. His hands trembled. Coins and bills spilled to the floor. "Thirty-six—hell, that's Pfister!"

Within six minutes, Lem Dooley, the pride and joy of Cactus County, was throwing his weight around. Grozinski, his deputy, was standing around in his two-hundred-bucks-a-throw snakeskin boots, trying to look smart.

After about a hundred "okay, who did it's?" Lem was still as confused as ever. The Pfister kid had suffered a strong blow. Beside him when Rafael found him was Jasper's old beat-up baseball bat, complete with lots of dirty adhesive tape around the handle—the same bat Jasper used when he managed to slug all of two hundred and fifty during his second year with the Flagstaff Boppers, the same bat he's used for years at Lulu's to crush ice with or pound a nail into a squeaky floorboard.

Sheriff Dooley came up with two suspects—Jasper McGonnigle and Rufus Pendelton, who is of course scared stiff. But if the Pendelton kid didn't do it, maybe there was a bright side to it—since from what I saw of Pfister's head he'd be on ice for a few weeks, meaning the Pendelton kid would start the season for the Crackers at second base. And no way the peach-fuzzed kid could have done it to Pfister. Most of the time he was sitting in the rear booth, wanting to cry over maybe getting cut from the team and probably trying to figure out what to tell his girl.

"Mazie, you swear Pendelton was never out of your sight?" said Mr. Law and Order.

"Lookee here, Lem—you gotta realize I was busier than a bee at a honey jar and I didn't notice everything that went on, but I'd say the kid never left his booth from the time he came in. All you got on him is circumstantial—him maybe about to lose his job to number thirty-six, who must be nursing the world's biggest headache."

"You think *Jasper* bopped Pfister?"

"Lem—that's a laugh. You gotta do better than that."

"Mazie, you jist knock it off right there. I guess me and Grozinski are gonna have to git statements from everyone. Meantime, nobody leaves here and nobody else comes in."

Nine-fifteen at night. Normally by now, Mazie would have her hair up in curlers and her feet soaking in a hot pan of epsom salts and water, maybe a small glass of sherry nearby to compliment the dreamy mood of a Glen Campbell oldie.

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"Mazie, I'm missing my classes," complained Rafael.

Thelma wasn't about to be outdone. "Big deal, Rafael. I'm missing my aerobics class at the activity center." She was steadying her nerves with a plate of orange-chocolate and butter pecan ice cream.

Rafael nudged me in the ribs and took me aside. "Jasper's on the sauce. He's nursing the bottle he hides under the potato sacks in the storage bin."

I scooched back there and confronted Jasper.

"Jasper, you jist lay off that two-bucks-a-gallon firewater."

"Only steadying my frazzled nerves, Maze. Dooley says if nobody confesses up he's gonna pin the rap on me because it's my bat that scrunched the kid."

I patted the big galoot on the back. "Stop fretting, Jasper. Did you take a good look at the baseball bat—a real good look?" I plunked my weary carcass down on top of a butcher-block cutting table.

" 'Course I seen it. Damned mess. By now that kid is in the hospital with a bandage on his head big enough to cover an elephant. Probably has a good case of double vision and—"

"Jasper, jist hold on. You're missing the point I was going to make. You ain't a left-hander."

"Come again, Mazie. No riddles. My brain's like a bowl of mush."

I explained. "You always hit from the right side of the plate. At least you did when I used to watch you play for the Boppers. Everything you do around here is right handed—from burning vittles to dishing out miserable wages to us hired hands. Whoever hit Pfister was left-handed."

Jasper picked up a plumber's helper that happened to be handy and assumed his rather unorthodox batting stance—big feet spread wide apart, body in a half crouch—and the plumber's helper waved menacingly behind his big right ear.

"Gotcha, Mazie. I see it now. If Pfister was zonged by a right-hander, the dried blood would have been on the other side of the bat, next to the manufacturer's trademark. But the blood was on the other side. Zowie, a left-hander clobbered him. Mazie, if you ain't got a case of the smarts!"

"Just a theory, Jasper. Of course, it could have been a right-hand swinger holding the bat upside down."

Sheriff Dooley and Grozinski were about ready to wrap things up. "Thanks for the java, Mazie. Keeps a body going. Man, it's been a rough day."

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"You tell me your troubles, Lem, I'll tell you mine. What do you say? Can we flee the coop?"

"Yeah," said Buck Denefree. "We got a real tight schedule. We're due to catch the two A.M. flight to Los Angeles." He had a case of the fidgets, hands shaky, eyes bleary.

Lem grunted. "Yeah—you can all go. I know where to find you."

I looked at Rufus Pendelton. "Well, sonny, it looks like you open the season at second base, after all. Right, Bucky baby?"

Denefree sniffled. He wiped his nose. "Yeah, kid—you're the keystone tenant. But holding onto it depends on how well you do. You can't keep letting ground balls scoot through your legs. I gotta have a winning ballclub. Lots of hits and no errors." He shifted nervously from one foot to the other. "C'mon, guys, let's get rolling—hit the road."

"Hold it, Buck," I said. "Just two quick questions. What was Pfister doing behind the restaurant in the first place? The team bus was parked out front. He was outside getting a breath of fresh air? Stretching his legs? Maybe meeting someone? My second question is, how many left-handed hitters have you got on the ballclub?"

When I heard the answer, I knew I should have kept my big mouth shut. Would you believe it? Only two left-handed hitters—Pfister and the Pendelton kid. I knew Pfister didn't skull himself with Jasper's bat. My smarts had painted me right into a corner and I realized I was digging a grave for Pendelton.

Lem Dooley had a silly grin on his face. "I was thinking of the left-hander bit myself," he said. "Pendelton—where's Pendelton?"

Ten-thirty P.M. and the Cucamonga Crackers were gone. Without poor Pendelton, who took a ride with Dooley and Grozinski in the black-and white.

Jasper, Thelma, Rafael, and me had closed up and were lingering out behind the restaurant. Jasper and Thelma held flashlights and splashed the ground with beams of yellow light. Rafael and me were on our hands and knees, going over every inch of the sandy ground. "What in the name of Uncle Fred's long johns do you two idiots hope to find?" mumbled Jasper.

"Clues. There might jist be something out here to tell us why Pfister got clobbered," I replied. My knees ached. The palms of my hands felt like pincushions. Maybe Jasper was right. We'd been mooching around in the dark for fifteen minutes without anything

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to show for it except sore knees, sore hands, and a ruined pair of pantyhose.

"Jasper, your ball bat. Did you show it to anyone today? I mean, like any of the Crackers?"

"Yeah. I showed Bucky the bat. And the kid, Ortiz—he's the right fielder. Maybe one or two others. I think Pfister had ahold of the bat for a while there."

"You keep the bat in the storage room. Did you put it back there after your show-and-tell session?"

"Not me. Like I told Lem, last I saw of it it was being passed back and forth. Everyone was laughing over the dirty adhesive tape on the handle."

"Ah ha," said Rafael.

"Ah ha what, my little tortilla?" I asked him.

"This—here by the storage-room door." He held up a small plastic envelope.

"What's this? Some scouring powder?" said Jasper, crouching down with his flashlight.

"And a straw," sighed Thelma. "This junk ain't important at all. Stop making like a private eye, Mazie. Let's all go home. It's past my sack time."

"Okay," I agreed. "Let's call it quits. We've got a busy one tomorrow. Meatloaf Special day—all you can gorge on for a buck ninety-five."

"Go on," Jasper said, the beam of his flashlight playing on the back of the building. "I've got to close the men's restroom window there. I guess I forgot it in all the excitement."

Along about eleven forty-five, after I finished watching the late news and drained the last of a glass of dry sherry, something began to give me the miseries. The plastic envelope, the straw, what Jasper said looked like scouring powder. And there was one more thing that bugged the bejabbers out of me. I grabbed ahold of the phonebook and placed a call to the newspaper. I asked for the sports desk.

"You kidding?" said the operator. "There's no one there this time of night. Try tomorrow morning."

"It's important. I have to speak with the sports editor—or a sports reporter."

"You calling from a bar?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

The switchboard operator laughed. "Nothing—only when we get

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a call this time of night it's usually someone wants an answer to a sports question. To settle a bet, you know."

"That ain't what this is. It's important. It can't wait until morning," I pleaded.

"Okay. But don't tell him I gave you his home phone number. He's our freshman sportswriter, a statistical whiz. Luck, honey."

I dialed the number she gave me. On the eighth ring I got a sleepy voice.

"Yes—it's in a biographical rundown. He did. Not often, but he could and he did. According to the record, he switched at least—let's see—"

I thanked him and hung up. The sheriff's office patched me through to Lem Dooley's home.

"Yeah, Mazie—he just got in. The big ape is raiding the refrigerator. Better he should raid a few massage parlors," said Florentia Dooley.

"What the hell you want, Mazie?" howled Lem Dooley into the phone.

"Send a car around to my house," I told him. "Git ahold of Grozinski and another deputy. I have a good idea who pounded Pfister and why."

"Dang it, Mazie—"

"Lem, git that car over here pronto. The Cucamonga Crackers are birding out of Phoenix International for L.A. at two A.M. You have to see a man. And git that Pendelton kid released from the cage. He didn't do nothing to nobody."

I haven't jumped into action so fast since the night old Rance Howser jabbed me in the leg with his spur while dipping me at a Senior Citizens tag dance.

Lem, Grozinski, and me were hot-footing it through Phoenix International terminal number two. The black-and-white was parked at the curb and the last wailing scream of its siren was still ringing in my eardrums. We zipped through a security checkpoint and did a broken field run for Gate 16. The waiting room was half filled with redeye-flight passengers—and draped sleepily over more than a dozen of the seats were Cucamonga Crackers.

"What the hell? What gives?" cussed Buck Denefree. "You muggs work twenty-four hours a day?"

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Grozinski assumed an arms-folded posture, placing his back up against the glass door that led to the waiting big bird.

"You go ahead, Mazie—it's your show," said Lem Dooley. In one hand he held the plastic envelope and the soda straw.

"Want to tell us all about it, Buck?" I asked.

"Tell you what? You've taken in one of my boys as a suspect."

"Bucky—" I interrupted. "I was able to speak with Hank Pfister. He's conscious. Sheriff Dooley ran me out to the hospital before we came here."

"Yeah? What did he have to say?"

"All he said was, 'How the mighty have fallen.' Does that mean anything to you?"

Denefree sagged against the check-in counter. His eyes were pleading. "Not here in front of the kids. Let's get lost, huh?"

We were down the hallway a good thirty feet from the Gate 16 waiting room.

"How did you guess?" Denefree asked.

My stomach was doing flip-flops. "Bucky—just look at yourself. You're still a youngster compared to me, but you look a hundred." I reached out and took the envelope and soda straw from Lem.

Buck Denefree's rheumy eyes clouded with tears. "It started a few years back. My bones began to creak. There's a steel pin in my right hip that drives me crazy. I needed a high. Me—Buck Denefree—bouncing around in the minors, eating greasy food and wet-nursing a bunch of kids. With luck, they'll all make it to the big leagues someday. Me—I've got noplace to go but down."

"Look—the plane leaves in a few minutes. Pfister said he won't press charges. He said he looked out of the restroom window and saw you snorting. He went out back to confront you with it. The rest is hazy. He insists he tripped and cracked his head on the steps to Jasper's storage room. That doesn't explain the blood on the bat."

Buck Denefree blew his nose. "Pfister's a good kid. He had the bat with him—I think he'd been trying to clean it up a little. We struggled—"

"Another cup of coffee, Lem?" I asked, sloshing black dynamite into his empty cup without waiting for an answer.

"I hope he appreciates what you did for him, Mazie. If he gets off the junk and straightens himself out, that'll be a feather in your cap."

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I shuffled a handful of greasy menus and set them on the counter in a neat stack. "It will work itself out. The Pfister kid is being released from the hospital tomorrow. The double vision's cleared up. He'll be on the injured list for two weeks, then Rufus Pendelton will be reassigned to a Crackers affiliate team with no loss in salary."

"Mazie, where's my flapjacks?"

"Lordy knows, Dexter. Someplace between here and Tucson maybe. Rafael, look at all them dirty dishes stacking up. Thelma, you got a customer at table number four—shake your duster! Land sakes, turn my back one sweet minute and the place goes to the dogs."

DETECTIVERSE

DEAD GIVEAWAY

by RENA GARTER KUNIS

The hitman did his chore very well
Till he went to answer the front bell,
The clothes that he wore
Still covered with gore—
Said the cops at the door, "Blood will tell."

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a *NEW* short story by

MIRIAM SHARMAN

"Mother's best off here," Frank said. "Christine's got the right temperament."

"Like Father," Peter murmured with a wry smile. "Lets the storm develop and waits until it subsides, snug in the shelter of her own integrity. By God, she did right to turn down our conscience money . . ."

A KIND OF MURDER

by MIRIAM SHARMAN

The small family group followed the headwaiter to their table, which was immaculately laid in crisp white napery and sparkling glass. A slender silver vase carefully hoarding pink rosebuds was the only decoration. The penthouse restaurant, a recent addition to the large Edwardian hotel on the seafront, afforded magnificent views of the watery horizon.

Dora Matthews shook off her son's protective hand as he guided her to the chair directly facing the sea, a rather rough sea in the stiff May breeze.

"It's no treat for me to sit here, Peter," she said tartly. "I *live* in Brighton, get enough of the sea. Too much of it." She walked briskly around the table and seated herself in the chair which backed onto the window. "There, that's better," she said with satisfaction. "I can see everybody from here."

There was a quiet, indulgent murmuring from her sons, Peter and Frank, but Christine, her daughter, remained silent, her face expressionless.

Dora had decided she might just as well squeeze the most out of the occasion—her seventieth birthday. She received little enough

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attention nowadays. She ordered the most expensive items on the menu and announced that if she couldn't have champagne she wouldn't drink anything.

"Why, of course you shall have champagne, Mother." Peter smiled at her affectionately.

The meal progressed on a happier note as Dora's resentment dissolved in the champagne and good food and the obsequies of the staff. She enjoyed queening it. This was how her old age was to have been all the time, not only for a few hours once a year.

Daringly, she drank her coffee black. Why shouldn't she? There was nothing wrong with her heart, nothing physically wrong with her at all. The doctor had said she'd live to be ninety.

Her face lit up as she caught sight of the waiter crossing the room to her table, carrying a miniature birthday cake, prettily decorated, and with a single candle in the center. He bowed. "With the compliments of the management, Madame."

She hadn't forgotten how to be charming and she would up the luncheon party by being gracious to everybody, thanking Peter and Frank for the excellent meal and the waiters for their service. Then, tall, gaunt, striking in her green high-necked dress, she led her family briskly out of the restaurant.

She made herself comfortable in the passenger seat of Peter's new Rover, fastened her seatbelt, and watched Christine and Frank in the mirror as they settled themselves in the back. She felt sleepy in spite of the coffee and knew she would have to have a nap as soon as she got to Christine's, but she kept herself rigidly under control during the short drive, forcing herself to keep awake. As they drove along the row of semidetached houses, she averted her eyes from number thirty-nine. Although she had been living there for the past ten months, she still could not bear the sight of its shabby, characterless exterior.

"Simon's taken the children to the beach," Christine said. "They're having a picnic-tea so it will be peaceful for you, Mother, while you have your rest."

"I'll see you to your room," Peter murmured.

Dora barely allowed him to touch her arm to support her as she slowly climbed the stairs. He glanced quickly around her room, noticing one or two improvements since his last visit—a comfortable new armchair, a bedside table—second-hand, but of good solid wood, an attractive reading lamp on it. He glanced inquiringly at his mother.

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"Christine bought them. She does her best," Dora said drily, "considering they live on a shoestring. Her own fault, of course. You look just like your father," she added with apparent irrelevance.

He smiled without amusement. "Oh, come, Mother, everybody knows I resemble you." He guided her to the mirror over the dressing-table. "There." The resemblance was indeed strong, both of them tall, dark, lean to gauntness.

"You look more than fifty-one, Peter," she murmured. "Anyway, I'm not talking about physical looks. I'm talking about that hangdog expression when your feelings of guilt get in the way of your single-mindedness."

"Nonsense. We've been over all this before, Mother. My first duty is to my wife and family," he said firmly. "You couldn't settle down with us." He broke off at the flame of contempt that lit her face.

"I want to rest," she said. "Go down to the others."

"I'll come and fetch you for tea at half past four," he murmured placatingly.

Frank and Christine looked at him inquiringly as he joined them in the sitting room. He shrugged. "She doesn't get any easier."

"How's the garage business?" Christine asked, not because she cared but because she thought it conversationally safe.

"It's going well," Peter said with satisfaction. "I've got ten now. Shouldn't be surprised if I get an offer from one of the big people in a couple of years."

"That's good?" she asked.

"Make my fortune."

"Oh, splendid." Christine sounded vague. "Frank tells me the estate-agency business is booming, too."

The two brothers exchanged glances. Frank's light hair and pasty features contrasted unfavorably with Peter's dark good looks. He shifted in the armchair. All three reacted with annoyance to the creaking of rusty springs.

"Frank and I have discussed this, Christine," Peter said. "We simply can't understand why you and Simon won't take money from us toward Mother's keep."

"Mother pays for her keep," Christine replied coldly.

"But twenty pounds a week—" Frank protested.

"It covers her food and laundry and heating. Why should I take anything from you?"

"For your trouble," Frank blurted out.

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There was a brittle silence. Christine stood and walked slowly toward the door. Her neat, chiseled features, set in a smooth frame of sleek fair hair, registered contempt. She looked at each of her brothers thoughtfully. "If you want to save me trouble, why don't you keep to your part of the bargain? That's what mother resents."

"Has she said any more about it?" Frank asked quickly.

"She doesn't have to keep on saying it," Christine replied. "It's implicit in her whole bearing. She hates it here—the smallness of things, my three female children. She can't forgive me for not having a son. And she's bitter over her failure to dominate. We don't thwart her, you see, and that's what frustrates her. She misses the satisfaction of victories, big or small. We can't give them to her. Simon and I aren't made that way." She opened the door. "I'll make us a cup of tea," she said as she left the room.

"Christine's got a bloody martyr complex," Frank muttered. "If she'd refused to have her here, Mother would have had to settle into a suitable guesthouse." He ran a hand through his limp hair and shook his head helplessly. "All those posh places, with only a few residents—not a whiff of old people's homes about them. But she just blood-mindedly refuses to consider it. Prefers this—this dump."

Peter crossed to the window and looked out onto the haphazard back garden. "I suppose Joan wouldn't reconsider about having her to live with you?" he began.

"Not on your life," Frank said briskly. "We put up with Mother for six awful months. Never again."

Peter sighed. "That's what Cynthia says." He crossed the room and sat by his brother. "They decided on joint action, our two wives. After those nerve-wracking months when we each took our turn—" He shook his head in disbelief at the recollection.

Frank nodded. "Mother's simply got to stay put with Christine." He frowned and looked at his podgy white hands as if for inspiration. "Why do you think Christine puts up with her? There can't be anything in it—I mean, moneywise." His voice tailed off as Christine pushed the door open with her foot, carrying a tea-tray. Peter crossed quickly to relieve her of it.

"I put up with Mother because I can't bear to see her humiliated," she said, answering Frank directly. She handed each of them a cup of tea and sipped her own. "She hates living here but she's not as wretched as she would be among strangers. And I'm not so sure that a guesthouse would tolerate her." She paused. "She's haunted by this family thing."

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"It was her idea," Peter said brusquely, "to give us our share when we needed it. We didn't suggest it."

Christine nodded. "But you didn't try to dissuade her, either."

"Christine, take some money from us," Peter coaxed. "Without saying anything to Mother, of course."

"Simon and I prefer to retain our freedom of action. I know it doesn't seem to add up, but theoretically I could ask her to leave tomorrow without feeling I'd cheated, as you two have done."

"Mother knows perfectly well," Peter said deliberately, "that she's so blotted her copybook with Cynthia and Joan that they simply won't put up with her."

"They were party to the agreement," Christine pointed out sharply. There was a glint of mischief in her eyes and a hint of mockery in her voice. "You haven't quite cut the umbilical cord, either of you."

There was a long pause. Peter cleared his throat. "Christine, does Mother say anything about Frank and me, about how she really feels? Is it so terribly vital to her that we have her stay with us?" He cast around for words. "I mean—is there anything more to it than just disappointment?"

Christine took her time before replying. "If there was any way she could get back at you, she would. She sometimes talks when we're alone, more than she means to, but once she gets started she lets rip. I've had several confidences from her I'd have preferred not to have—about Father and her contempt at the way he always deferred to her. I don't believe everything she tells me, but I don't think she's deliberately lying. It's just that by the time she digs things out of her memory they're distorted. I don't think she's changed because she's old, she's just more of the same." Christine's voice shook a little. "She was having one of her tantrums recently. It was at tea-time and I was trying to cope with the food and the children, and Mother started to scold Helen. Nobody said anything. And getting no satisfaction, she whipped herself up into one of her outbursts."

"God, yes," Peter said feelingly. "I know exactly what you mean."

Christine sighed. "Nobody stood up to her, at least not in the way she wanted, so she went to her room. Simon followed her upstairs. He told her she could indulge her ego as much as she liked with himself or with me, but if she once again put on a performance like that before the children she'd have to go." Christine paused. "Simon told me she seemed subdued. She asked him where she would go? And he said she had two rich sons with big houses, thanks to her

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generosity. She turned her back on him. She'd lost her sons, she said, she meant nothing to them now. He could hear the tears in her voice, so he slipped out and left her to her heartbreak."

Peter licked his lips, hesitated, then asked: "How long ago was that?"

"A couple of weeks."

"But you wouldn't turn her out, would you, Christine?" Frank blinked his fair lashes anxiously.

"No, but—"

"But what?" Peter eyed her warily.

"I think she's wrapped up now in a kind of despair."

"Don't dramatize, Christine," Frank said irritably. "You always were a one for that."

She gathered up the cups and saucers, put them on the tray, and went with it to the kitchen.

"Mother's best off here," Frank said. "Christine's got the right temperament."

"Like Father," Peter murmured with a wry smile. "Lets the storm develop and waits until it subsides, snug in the shelter of her own integrity. By God," he said harshly, "she did right to turn down our conscience money."

Frank looked at him in astonishment. "There's nothing to stop your having Mother to stay if that's how you feel," he said contemptuously.

"You know damn well it would finish my marriage."

"Well, then, come to terms with it, as I've done." Frank stretched his short legs and eyed the toecaps of his bespoke shoes. "Mother's had her life, and a good one at that. She's not destitute and she has only herself to blame if she won't adapt."

Peter nodded. "Yes, of course you're right." He looked around the simple underfurnished room. "It's not exactly luxurious here, of course, but it's—homey." He shrugged and his mouth tightened. "Mother will just have to put up with it. There's no other way. It's decent of Christine and Simon's a nice chap, in his own way. And Mother can't say we didn't try."

"When I think of those months, with Joan and young Geoffrey battling it out against her bossiness." Frank shuddered. "Oh, no—let's just get this weekend over with, that's all I care about."

Peter went to the French windows. "What about a breath of air?"

Frank heaved himself out of his chair. "Bit chilly," he muttered, "but I suppose it will do us good. We've got to work up an appetite

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for a piece of birthday cake. Joan ordered it from Fortnum's, ought to be worth eating."

Dora, struggling back to consciousness from her nap, heard the very faint murmur of their voices. She didn't immediately identify them. It could be the neighbors, she thought drowsily. All the houses in the row were so jerrybuilt that noises penetrated everywhere.

A wave of self-pity swept over her as her mind cleared and she remembered her predicament. She gave herself up to recollections of her mistakes and regrets. That old fool, John Weatherby, who had been her husband's lifelong friend, was responsible for the mess she was in. She'd talked to him about the difficulties of running her large Kensington house and he'd boasted to her about his solution to the same problem. He'd divided most of his estate among his four children and he lived with each of them for three months at a time. They almost fought to have him. But, he'd pointed out, it wouldn't do for everyone. A parent had to have the right sort of children.

She had taken it as a challenge. He had, she felt, deliberately provoked her into a comparison with her own children.

Dora sighed. She could remember having slight misgivings at the time, in an inarticulate sort of way, but the more she had let herself think about it, the more she had warmed to the idea. Her lawyer hadn't been enthusiastic, she acknowledged now, but he had understood her and recognized her need to make the grand gesture. She had signed the new will, heeding his advice on how to protect fairly the remainder of her estate.

At the start it had worked well enough, but first Cynthia, then Joan, had made mischief, complaining endlessly about everything she did and said. Now here she was, vegetating in Brighton, bored and restless and cut off from her sons and grandsons.

She crossed to the window and cautiously looked down onto the garden. Peter and Frank were talking, judging by their gestures, about the plants and flowers. Typical, she thought irritably, nothing better to talk about. What about their betrayal of her, their mother?

She had had a real weapon in her possession and she had disarmed herself. If she had kept all her money, Peter and Frank and their wives would have been afraid to offend her in case she disinherited them. But she hadn't been able to tolerate old Weatherby's crowing and she'd chanced it. Not that she had seen it as a gamble at the time. No, she told herself, Frank and Peter had changed in these last two years. Their wives were to blame.

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She drew back quickly from the window as Frank glanced up. No use blaming their women, she thought miserably. If the men had any spirit, they'd stand up to them. More than anything, she resented her helplessness, the feeling that she could no longer influence events.

There was a knock on the door. She seated herself on the stool in front of her dressing-table. "Come in," she called brightly as she tidied her soft grey hair and patted a little powder over her face.

Peter entered. "Ah, you're up." He smiled. "And looking rested and jolly handsome, Mother, if I may say so."

"Your Cynthia won't wear as well as I've done," she said smugly. "Young people nowadays simply haven't the stamina."

Peter nodded and murmured his endorsement of his mother's platitudes as he guided her downstairs to the sitting room, where the tray was laid with Christine's best china. Dora read aloud the inscription on the birthday cake, vigorously cut several slices, and ate the largest one herself. She nodded approvingly as Frank told her it had been specially ordered by Cynthia from Fortnum's, but she remained quiet throughout the tea party, her expression thoughtful. Her sons exchanged uneasy glances. They would be easier in their minds if she kept up her usual flow of snide remarks.

They kissed her dutifully before leaving. "See you tomorrow afternoon," they said with as much enthusiasm as they could muster.

Dora linked arms with her two sons and walked with them into the hall to the front door. Christine watched the performance with a puzzled frown.

"Just before you go," Dora said crisply, "I want to tell you that I am not prepared to stay on here at Christine's. I want both of you to sit down tonight with your wives and talk it over calmly and sensibly. I want you to honor your bargain with me. I want to be a real grandmother to my family. And I don't want to be offered crumbs." Her voice trembled but it did not grow weaker. "The crumbs of a couple of visits a year and an empty birthday celebration as a sop." She held up a forbidding hand as both men were about to protest. "No, don't say anything now. Bring me your answer tomorrow, when you're with your wives."

She stood in the open doorway and watched them drive off. Then she turned and met Christine's eyes. "It's nothing personal," she said. "It's just that I feel stifled here. I'm not young enough or spry enough to travel around, to take day trips to London to visit Peter

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and Frank. After all, I've been a Londoner all my life and I'm bored here."

Christine smiled. "Of course you are, Mother," she said mildly. "I wish you luck in your campaign to get taken back into the fold. I really do, but please be prepared for a refusal. Don't build your hopes."

"Simon and the children will be back soon," Dora said. She sat down in the squeaking armchair in front of the fire. "They must eat up the cake. There will be another one for tomorrow's tea party." Her smile was sour. "Substitutes for the real thing."

"Cakes can be produced to order, Mother. Affection and loyalty can't. Suppose you won your battle with them and moved into their homes. It would be an empty sort of victory, wouldn't it, your strong character wearing them down?"

Dora looked pleased and eyed her daughter with approval. "You think I'm a strong character?" she asked. "You really do?"

Christine nodded and tried to keep the bitterness out of her voice. "I really do, Mother—stronger as you've gotten older."

Dora looked at her contemplatively. "You're more like me than you realize, Christine. Under that mild exterior, there's quite a bit of steel."

Christine heard the door of Simon's Mini-Traveler slam, heard his cultivated voice and the children's chatter, and with a surge of relief went to the door to greet them.

The continuing celebrations on the following day passed off predictably. The chilly wind had dropped, the sun shone, the French windows were opened wide. By sharing the garden and the sitting room, the overcrowding problem was alleviated. Dora accepted her gifts graciously, good-humoredly tolerated the noisy tea party with all her grandchildren, then instructed them to play in the garden. She wanted a short talk with her sons and their wives, she said. There was, she added firmly, no need for Simon to be present. Thankfully, he joined the young people in the garden.

Dora wasted no time. "Well?" she queried, looking boldly at each of them in turn. Frank lowered his eyes and remained silent. Peter, after a quick glance at his wife's expressionless face, spoke placatingly. "We did as you asked, Mother—we discussed the situation fully. Things didn't work out before—why should they now?" There was a long pause. Cynthia broke the silence.

"You weren't happy with us or with Frank—" she began.

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"Happy!" Dora's interruption was contemptuous. "I was alive!" Her fine dark eyes flashed angrily. "I might as well be dead here." She turned her gaze full on Joan, then on Cynthia. They fidgeted resentfully under her scrutiny. "God knows," she said in a loud, mocking voice, "what my sons saw in you." She stood and turned to go. "No! No pretended solicitude. I'll make my own way upstairs. I'm physically fitter than the lot of you."

They listened in silence to her steady footsteps mounting the stairs. "Mother just can't resist making scenes—striking attitudes," Frank grumbled. "That's where you get your dramatizing from, Christine," he added with ill-timed jocularity.

Christine made it plain that she wanted them all to clear out. They needed no encouragement. By six o'clock Simon was seated with a beer in the creaking armchair, the children were having their milk and biscuits before going to bed, and Christine was trying to make up her mind if there was any point in attempting, however indirectly, to comfort her mother. In the end, she decided she wouldn't be welcome so soon after the altercation. She and Simon went through the cosy routine of bathing the little girls, reading the familiar stories to them, and settling them down for the night with comforting hugs. They then had a couple of hours on their own, watching television, talking quietly.

"It's nearly nine," Christine said. "Mother's obviously not coming back down tonight. I'll take her a tray."

Dora had very definite ideas about her food and Christine laid the tray carefully. There was the glass of warm milk, mixed with a patent food supplement and heavily sweetened, two plain biscuits well buttered with best-quality butter, and a generous helping of her own special honey. Her mother had developed a very sweet tooth in her latter years.

"Nice old boy, the coroner," Frank said.

Christine had invited her brothers for coffee and sandwiches after the inquest.

"Misadventure," Peter murmured. "An overdose. Accidents happening all the time with sleeping pills."

"Mother committed suicide," Christine said flatly.

She had their total attention as she opened her handbag and took out a sheet of paper. "This note was on her bedside-table." Her voice was steady as she read it aloud. " 'Christine—I don't want to go on. I've left my money to your girls, safely tied up in a trust.' " Slowly

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and deliberately, she tore the letter into shreds and set them alight in an ashtray. There was a long uneasy silence.

"You could have spared us the suicide bit," Peter said bleakly.

"Yes," she agreed. "But I didn't choose to." She took a deep breath. "I want to tell you the rest. I went to Mother's room with her supper about nine o'clock that night, not the following morning as I stated at the inquest."

"Then she couldn't have been dead!" Frank shouted. "It wasn't a hefty overdose, the pathologist said so!"

Christine's voice dropped to a whisper. "I put the tray down quietly on the table and gently shook her shoulder. She didn't stir. There was the empty bottle of pills and the empty water glass—and the letter to me." Her face looked drawn, almost haggard, as she recalled the scene. "I touched her cheek. It was still warm. I thought—she's not dead, I must phone the doctor, phone for an ambulance, rush and tell Simon. But I couldn't move. I found myself identifying with her, feeling as she must have felt. She had needed to die. I had been a disappointment to her in life, but she was depending on me not to betray her."

There was a long silence. Frank stared at Christine wonderingly, then indignation spilled over. "Emotional twaddle! Nothing to do with all that money to your three!"

Peter found his voice. "It was a kind of murder," he said accusingly.

The seconds ticked by.

"A kind of murder," Frank echoed.

Christine had regained her composure. She eyed her brothers dispassionately. "You can call it that if you like," she said coldly. "But I only finished what you two started. That's what she wanted you to know. And to live with, if you can."

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a *NEW* short story by

CLARK HOWARD

The big room was blue with accumulated smoke. From a radio somewhere, Willie Nelson was singing that mamas shouldn't let their babies grow up to be cowboys. A plank resting on two oil drums served as a counter, behind which sat an ancient Indian man with a cigar box substituting for a cash register. Next to him was a household refrigerator with a magic-marker message scribbled on its door: Beer 50¢. Farther into the room was a solitary pool table probably as old as the man at the counter, with nets hanging under each pocket and a stark white strip of adhesive tape mending a rip near one corner of the felt.

Four Flatheads were shooting imprecise pool while half a dozen others drank bottled beer and watched. Everybody paused to look at Davey as he entered. Two of the men, the Antler brothers, exchanged glances, and Will Antler said, "Well, well, lookit who's here. How come you ain't wearing a number, Flood?"

EQMM Readers Award winner Clark Howard's depth of subject matter and investment of emotion has combined yet again to produce a memorable, first-class story, just for you . . .

THE WIDE LOOP

by CLARK HOWARD

There were five men in the conference room when Ed Polk walked in, all of them standing at one end of a long shiny table, all of them smoking cigars. They had pink cheeks and expanding stomachs, and all wore bolo ties with slides made of precious metal or expensive gemstones. Fat, was Polk's first thought. Fat in the middle

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and fat in the wallet. Between the five of them, he imagined, they probably owned ninety percent of the cattle in western Montana.

"Hello, Polk," said Milford, the man who had sent for him. "Have a chair." The five cattlemen sat down at the end of the table where they stood and Polk took the chair nearest the door. He didn't bother removing his Stetson, merely pushing it to the back of his head. Ever how this meeting went, he thought, it would not take long.

"I reckon you know why we sent for you." It was Milford talking again.

"Sure," Polk said. "Somebody's throwing a wide loop. You got rustling problems." His words were slow, his voice soft as brushed suede.

"You're half right," said Milford. "We don't have a problem *yet*—but we expect one." On the table was a manila envelope, which Milford slid down to him. "Newspaper clippings on a kid named Dave Flood, from up Bear Claw way. 'Course, he's not exactly a kid no more—must be twenty-seven or twenty-eight by now. But he wasn't more than eighteen or so when those newspaper clippings start. Family used to own a spread up near Flathead Lake. Father, uncle, older boy worked it. Father and uncle died and the older boy took over. Had his younger brother growing up to help him. Make a long story short, our cattlemen's association—" he gestured around at the others "—took over the place about ten years ago after it was foreclosed on for mortgage default."

Milford paused to pour a drink of water from a silver decanter on the table. He could have stopped talking right then as far as Polk was concerned. Polk had heard the story many times. Milford called it a "cattlemen's association." Small ranchers everywhere called it a "Combination"—with a capital C. Polk had looked the word up one time. Combination: two or more persons working as a team to achieve some kind of ordered sequence. In this case, the two or more persons were cattlemen who had a lot of money and the ordered sequence was the systematic acquisition of land from small ranchers who did *not* have a lot of money. Polk knew without being told that Milford and his friends—one of whom was probably the banker—had *forced* the foreclosure. It happened from time to time like that, all over the West.

"Anyways," the cattleman continued, "when we evicted the brothers, why, the older one, Duane, took his fam'ly and moved onto another spread as a tenant rancher. But the younger brother, Dave Flood, went completely hog-wild. Took a rifle and started shooting

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the stock. Killed fourteen head before the sheriff got to him. Did six months county jail time for it. Soon's he got out, why, he came right back at us—started stealing our calves one at a time before they were branded. Some he sold, some he just give away to them goddamned lazy Flatheads out on the reservation. Went on for about a year before we caught him with one of our cows and the rope still in his hand. This time he got sent to the reformatory down in Bozeman. Served two and a half years there. And when he got out, I'm damned if he didn't come back at us again!"

Milford paused, as if expecting some kind of reaction from Polk, some expression of incredulity or outrage at such rank behavior. But Ed Polk's expression remained inscrutable—he did not even blink. Finally, Milford cleared his throat and continued.

"This time, Dave Flood got hisself an Indian partner and a flatbed truck with sidebars and started in rustling our stock half a dozen head at a time. I'm not talking calves now, either. He started stealing full-growed stock, ready for market. Took 'em clear across the state and sold 'em to small ranchers for half their weight value, or give 'em away to Northern Cheyenne or Flathead or Crow families. Over an eight-month period, we figure he done us out of two hundred head or better. Well, sir, by god, when we caught him *this* time, we pulled a few strings and seen to it that he got sent to the *real* pen down at Deer Lodge. They give him seven years. He done four and a half. Gets out tomorrow."

Well, there it is, thought Polk. A kid in his twenties carrying a hard grudge because he thinks the old world done him wrong. Not a slick, professional rustler who throws a wide loop for a living. Not even a two-bit petty thief out to make weekend drinking money—just a kid in his twenties carrying a grudge. That's what it's come down to. There was a time when Polk wouldn't have touched this job. There was a time—

Quit that kind of thinking, he silently ordered himself. That was then; this is now. And this would help him get Helen back.

Milford stood up and with not a little effort squeezed his chubby fingers into the pocket slits of his western-cut trousers. "Polk, you're a registered range detective with the Montana Board of Livestock and you come highly recommended by both the Arizona Cattle Growers and the Texas Cattle Raisers Associations. Only thing is, all your references are three years old or more. Before we hire you, we wondered if you'd mind telling us what you've been doing the past few years?"

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Polk had figured the question would come up; he was ready for it. "Semi-retired," he said easily. "Gave up field work and hired out as a consultant. Found out I didn't like it, so I quit. Took an extended vacation for a while. Finally got itchy and decided to come back."

Milford studied him for a moment, weighing the explanation—weighing it, Polk knew, against rumors of heavy drinking, marital problems, and general unreliability. Polk met the cattleman's eyes with his own steady gaze and was careful to make sure that his hands, on top of the table, remained absolutely still. Under his arms, the sleeves of his shirt were wet down to the elbow.

"All right," Milford said at last. "This is what we want. No more chasing this boy—man, whatever—for six months or a year. We want him caught the very first time he touches a head of our stock. We want him caught with the goods—and we want him back in the Deer Lodge pen where he belongs. Give us that and you've got yourself five thousand dollars from each one of us. Twenty-five big ones."

Ed Polk stood up and shifted his Stetson back to eyebrow level.

"Deal," he said in his brushed-suede voice.

When the Missoula Stage Lines bus pulled into Bear Claw, Dave Flood got a sudden sick feeling in his stomach. The bus station was Nell's Cafe, on Main Street, which was right next to Swanson's Market, which was right next to Dixon's Feed and Grain Store. Probably the three busiest places in town. The sick feeling Dave got was from the fear that he would run into someone he knew, or who knew him. It was always embarrassing, seeing people again after getting out of prison.

But he was lucky this time: it was early November and late in the day. Most people had done their errands and headed for home. Even the bench inside Nell's window was empty. Dave got his paper-wrapped bundle of personal belongings from the baggage rack and walked to the front of the bus just as its big door eased open with a quiet pneumatic gush. Turning up the collar of his new denim jacket against the cold, he stepped off and started quickly down the street toward the county road, two blocks away, that led out to where his brother lived. It was six miles, but if he was lucky he would be able to hitch a ride. If not, it was still six miles.

As he passed a boarded-up store, a voice spoke to him from the doorway. "Hey, Davey."

Turning, he saw the dark, smiling Nez Perce face of Tommy Ten-killer. They had been friends since kindergarten. "Hey, Tommy,"

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Dave said, smiling back. He stepped into the doorway. They stood shoulder to shoulder without the unnecessary formality of a handshake, but both genuinely glad to see the other.

"Nice shoes," said Tommy, bobbing his chin at Dave's prison-issue brogans.

"Yeah, you can't hardly find these kind any more. How'd you know I was coming home today?"

"Your brother's wife mentioned to Sally Little Feather that you was getting out this week. I been watching the bus every day." Glancing cautiously up and down the street, Tommy took an unlabeled pint bottle from his hip pocket and handed it to Dave. Pulling the cork, Dave took a quick swallow, shuddering as the raisin-colored liquid seared a path to his stomach.

"Damn. That's good. Who made it?"

"Leon Elk, down on the Bitterroot reservation. 'Member him?"

"Was he the one built like a fireplug? Played linebacker for Frenchtown junior high?"

"That's him. Makes the best bootleg mash in the county."

Dave took another pull at the bottle and handed it back. The second swallow made his eyes water. "Just goes to show you. I never thought he'd 'mount to anything."

"He's come a long way," Tommy Tenkiller allowed. He took a double swallow without flinching and put the bottle back in his pocket. "The Combination's running cattle in five winter pastures around the lake," he said casually, hunching his shoulders as a gust of cold wind circuited the doorway. Dave noticed that his friend was wearing an unlined windbreaker and that the knees of his faded jeans were threadbare. Dave felt bad about that; Tommy was obviously down on his luck. But Dave couldn't allow that to make him change his mind.

"I'm not doing that no more, Tommy," he said quietly. The Indian studied him without comment, knowing there would be more. Dave looked away, then looked back and shrugged. "Since I was eighteen, I been locked up a total of seven years. This last stretch done it. I can't take no more of the pen, man. Being in there's like being dead. It ain't worth it."

Tenkiller nodded and checked the toes of his worn cowboy boots. Finally he shrugged, too. "Whatever you say," he told his friend.

Dave sighed quietly. "I'm sorry, man. I don't mean to let you down."

"No problem. Forget it."

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The cramped doorway was suddenly like a canyon with the two of them standing on opposite crests, far away and out of touch.

He doesn't know what it's like, Dave thought: the steel cells that never got warm in winter, never cool in summer; the greasy fried meat and tasteless boiled vegetables day in and day out; and then the things you sometimes had to do at night.

He doesn't know what it's like, Tommy thought: an Indian unable to find work because he was an Indian; remarks that white cowboys whispered behind your back; the knowledge that your tomorrows would always be exactly like your yesterdays, the future always a void.

They had been friends for more than two decades, but at this moment they would not let their eyes meet. The silence between them was too much for either of them.

"Listen, I got to go, man. I'll see you."

"Yeah, sure."

Ed Polk listened to the phone at the other end ring four times. Then it was picked up and Helen said, "Hello—" The sound of her voice made his whole chest warm.

"Helen? Hey, there. It's me. I got a job, honey."

There was an empty, hollow silence on the long-distance line, like there was a tunnel between them.

"Helen? You there, honey?"

"I'm here, Ed." There was no enthusiasm in her voice like there was in his. "Where are you?"

"At the Holiday Inn in Butte. Butte, Montana."

"I know where Butte's at, Ed," she said testily. "I'm not ignorant, you know."

"I know you ain't, honey. I didn't mean it like that." Careful, he warned himself. Watch every word. Don't set her off. "I got a job, Helen," he said again.

"Why'd you leave the treatment center, Ed?" she asked. As if the job could be damned.

"Why, because I was cured, honey," he told her cheerfully. He tried to sound chipper. When they were young, she'd always said she liked him the first time they'd met because he seemed chipper. That was a hundred years ago. "No need to stay at the treatment when my treatment's over, is there? I'm off the bottle, honey." He waited for her to say something but she remained silent, so he added

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quietly, "I'm off it for good, Helen." His tone sounded like he was begging. He guessed he was.

"What kind of job have you got?" she asked at last.

"Good job," he started to brag, then quickly checked himself—she didn't like it when he bragged. "Well, the job itself ain't all that good—just some punk kid with a grudge against the Combination up here—but the money's right. Twenty-five thousand, honey. Shouldn't take me but a week or ten days, then I'll be coming home. Sure be glad to get back to some of that Florida sunshine. Hey, we'll have us a high old Christmas this year."

"There's lots of bills still need paying," she reminded him.

"Oh, sure. We'll pay those off first thing."

"I've been paying some of them myself," Helen said. "There's something you should know, Ed. I've gone to work."

Polk frowned. She had never worked in her life. "Gone to work? Doing what? Where?"

"I'm working for Harley Bright, in his office."

Polk's frown deepened to a scowl. Harley Bright was their insurance agent. Several times when he'd been at their mobile home, Polk had caught him glancing furtively at Helen's ample bosom.

"I had to do something, Ed," she said defensively. "There were creditors coming around every day."

Now it was Polk who became silent.

"Harley—Mr. Bright," she said, "arranged a payment plan with all the creditors so they wouldn't pester us any more. He's been very nice. Very helpful."

Bet he has, Polk thought. His silence continued.

Finally Helen said, "If you're really off the bottle, Ed, I'm happy for you. I'll be even happier for you if you *stay* off this time. As far as you coming home, us getting back together, I'll be honest with you, Ed: I'd have to think about that. There's lot of bad memories in these past few years."

"I see," he said, feeling his jaw tighten. "All right, you think about it then." He moistened his lips, wishing his throat wasn't so damned dry. "I'm heading north in the morning. Can I call you again in a day or so? After you've had a chance to think about it?"

"You can call me any time, Ed. I'd like us to be friends, no matter what."

Her words were like a kick in the stomach. He had the feeling it would have been better for them both if she'd said no and hung up

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on him. But maybe not. Maybe a little hope was better than none at all, ever how much it hurt to have it.

"I'll call you from Missoula or somewhere, then," he said, and Helen agreed again, and they ended their conversation.

After Polk hung up, he sat alone in the motel room trying to recall if his throat had ever been as damned dry as it felt at that moment.

Dave Flood got a ride with two teenagers in an ancient pickup truck on their way home from football practice. They let him off at the dirt road leading to the ranch house his brother Duane leased. He was hiking the half mile along that road when his two nieces came running up to meet him. Dave stopped and stared at them incredulously. Rita May was fourteen now, Ella Lou sixteen. They'd just been kids when he went up the last time—now they were young girls, both rapidly developing under the sweaters and jeans they wore.

"I can't believe you two," Dave said as they kissed and hugged him. "You're tall as your mother, near 'bout." He hadn't seen them in four and a half years. Rosetta, Duane's wife, had refused to visit Deer Lodge and forbidden Duane to take the girls when he himself drove down once a month. Duane had brought him their school pictures every year, but those were just faces. These delightful creatures in front of him had bodies, voices, personalities.

On the way to the house, each of them clinging to one of his arms, they were full of questions. "How was prison this time, Uncle Davey?"

"Not too bad," he lied. "I'm getting better at it."

"Did you get thrown in the hole this time?"

"Once or twice," he admitted.

"Were you in that riot they had last year?"

He shook his head. "That was in a different cellblock."

Rosetta was waiting on the porch when they walked up. She was a little heavier in the hips, had the beginning of a double chin, and her eyes had not grown any softer. Of course, she did not smile. She never smiled at him.

"Hello, Dave."

"Rosetta." He nodded and awkwardly stepped forward to kiss her on the cheek. Looking past her shoulder, he saw in the doorway behind her his only nephew, Larry Joe, who was ten and was autistic. "Hey, there, pardner," Davey said happily, stepping past the boy's

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mother and sitting down on his heels in front of him. "Look how you've growed. You 'member your Uncle Davey?"

The boy stared at him, wholly disinterested, then turned and walked away.

"Don't take it personal," Rosetta said. "He's like that with most ever'body."

"I wouldn't take it personal," Davey replied quietly. "I love the boy. He's my blood." When they all got in the house, he asked, "Where's Duane at?"

"Rode out to make sure the stock tank's got enough water in it so it won't freeze tonight."

Davey nodded.

"Get my box of things, honey, will you?" he said to Rita May, the younger girl. As she left the room, he asked Ella Lou, "Can you saddle a horse yet?"

She rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. "Of course. I can probably *ride* better than you."

"Prob'ly can. Go get a nice gentle mount ready for your old uncle, will you?"

"I'll give you Buttermilk," the girl said, heading back outside. "If I can wake her up."

Davey grinned at Rosetta. "Got a mouth like you used to have." Rita May came back with a cardboard carton, which she set in front of Davey. Opening it, he removed a pair of well-broken-in black-kid cowboy boots. Removing the prison-issue brogans, he slipped his feet into the soft leather uppers and felt his sole and arch and heel mold comfortably, perfectly, to the hard leather bottoms. He worked his ankles around a bit, then grinned. "That's more like it," he said. He handed the brogans to Rita May. "Throw these out, darlin'." Neither the girl nor her mother questioned the discarding of the brand new pair of shoes—both knew there were some things not fit for a man to wear.

Davey also had in the box an old sheepskin-lined wool coat and a pair of butter-colored caribou gloves with rope burns on the palms. He donned these, too, as well as a battered grey Stetson that was broken front, back, and top. Larry Joe was standing in front of the family J. C. Penney mail-order record player, staring at the recording as it went around, listening to the music it produced, his usually dull eyes alive with interest. Rosetta saw Davey pause a moment to watch him.

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"It's the only thing in the world he cares about," she said. "He'll stand for hours like that."

"Before he discovered music," Rita May said, "the only fun he got out of life was beating his head against the wall."

Rosetta threw her an irritated look. "There's a school for autistic children in Great Falls now. It's called the Hobart Institute. We taken him over there last spring for what they call an evaluation. Did Duane tell you about it?"

"No." Duane's visits every month had been awkward, at best. Davey and his older brother were eight years apart in age, and a million miles in philosophy. Duane was even-tempered, Davey a hothead; Duane, with a family, had to look ahead, while Davey couldn't forget the past; Duane followed every rule, every law, to the letter, but Davey was compelled by some inner instinct to examine each one for fairness. The brothers loved each other but no longer understood, or even tried to understand, what lay behind the motivation of the other.

"Well, this Hobart Institute said Larry Joe was—" She turned to Ella Lou, who was just coming back inside. "What's that word again, Ella Lou?"

"Educable, Mama."

"That's it. They said he could definitely learn things, didn't they, Ella Lou?"

"Larry Joe has what they call 'infantile autism,' " the older daughter told her uncle clinically. "His sensory perception is distorted. That causes difficulties in his speech, learning, and behavior patterns. The Hobart Institute has a psychiatrist, a psychologist, a neurologist, a speech therapist, and trained behavior counselors on its staff. It takes autistic children from all over the country, even some from Canada, and teaches them on an individual basis how to use their distorted perceptions as best they can. With Larry Joe, they would begin by teaching him music. The Hobart evaluation said he could probably learn to play the piano in three months."

Davey stared incredulously at his niece, hardly believing this mature explanation had come out of her. Rosetta shrugged. "Duane probably didn't tell you about her, either. They've moved her up two grades already. There's a full scholarship to the University of Montana waiting for her next fall. She'll only be seventeen. So young, away from home—"

"Now, Mama, don't start," said Ella Lou.

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Davey went over to her, studied her pretty young face for a moment, then shook his head in wonder. "I'll be damned," he said softly. He found himself wishing her grandmother, his and Duane's mama, could have lived to see her. Their mama had put high stock in a good education. Looking over at Rita May, Davey said, "What about you, little bit? You brilliant, too?"

"Nowheres near." The younger girl shook her head. "I prob'ly won't ever be nothing. Just a rancher's wife like Mama."

"Thanks a heap," Rosetta said drily.

"Is Larry Joe going to this Hobart place then, or what?" Davey wanted to know.

"No," Rosetta said, "not just yet." She turned away, plain indication to Davey that she didn't want to discuss it further. But Ella Lou followed him out to where Buttermilk glumly waited, saddled and bridled.

"Great Falls is too far away," she explained. "Larry Joe would have to be a boarding student and just come home on weekends. It's three thousand dollars a year for room and board. We're putting a hundred dollars a month away for it. That's the best we can do. We've got seven hundred so far."

Davey and his niece locked eyes in a moment of mutual truth. They both knew that what she had just described was a futile effort. Thirty months to pay for twelve? After the first year, Larry Joe would have to wait eighteen months to begin his second year. And if things didn't change for Duane, eighteen more months before he could start a third year.

Almost as if she'd read his mind, Ella Lou said,

"When I finish college, I want to teach English lit. I'll be able to help a lot."

Davey nodded. He reached up to stroke Buttermilk's ears. How would she be able to help? Teachers didn't make no goddamned money. Women working in the post office earned more. He forced a smile and turned to glide his knuckles over her cheek. "You're gonna make a right pretty teacher." Winking, he added, "Be Hollywood's loss, though."

"Go on," she said, blushing, pushing his hand away. Grinning, Davey swung up into the saddle as if it had been only yesterday instead of four and a half years since he'd last done it. He reined the horse to the right. "Come on, Buttermilk, le's see if you can make it to the stock tank."

Ella Lou's eyes were watery as she watched him ride off . . .

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Ed Polk guided a dark-brown van to the curb in Bear Claw and got out. Locking the door, he stood for a moment on the sidewalk, working the kinks out of his back and knees and shoulders. Getting too old for all this driving, he thought. His eyes flicked over the van. It was a reinforced off-the-road vehicle with four-wheel drive, steel-belted ground-gripper tires, and heavy-duty shocks. Almost drive up the side of a building with it. There were double panel doors in the rear and a sliding cargo door on one side. Oversized fuel tank. Fog lights. Hard-rubber bumper guards.

In the back of the vehicle, Polk had a pup tent, cold-weather sleeping bag, camping gear, cooking utensils, binoculars, an Arctic Cat two-seat snowmobile, and several haversacks, one of which contained extra fuel cylinders for the Cat. And a .30-caliber Grants rifle with a telescopic sight. He had bought everything but the van, snowmobile, and rifle with a thousand-dollar advance from Milford. The van and snowmobile had been rented from a hunting outfitting company in Helena, on Milford's signature. The hand-forged rifle he had owned for more than twenty years. It had two tiny notches in the stock. Both justified.

Down the street was a Winn's Dry Goods store. Polk walked toward it. Bear Claw, he thought, surveying the street, looked like it had once been a right nice little town. The kind of town in which he'd grown up—two blocks of small businesses that did ninety percent of their trade on Saturdays, two churches and one poolhall-saloon, a four-page newspaper that came out once a week—the kind of town that now was dying all over the West. Polk could see it in Bear Claw—every third storefront property vacant, the movie house boarded up, one church and four poolhall-saloons, a vending machine on the corner selling *USA Today*, green government trucks driven by men who looked after missile silos instead of cattle. Combinations instead of small ranchers. Kids like Dave Flood with bitter grudges. What in hell was the world—

Just listen to yourself, Ed interrupted his own thoughts. Pretty soon you'll be bitching about the weather. Forget it. Forget the things you can't do nothing about. Think about doing this job good and getting Helen back.

There was a small bell above the door that jingled as he entered Winn's. A middle-aged woman behind a counter looked up from something she was knitting. "Help you?"

"A spool of light-brown thread, please, ma'am," Polk said.

With the spool of thread in his pocket, Polk returned to the van

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and drove north out of Bear Claw. On the seat beside him was a map of the area, with yellow shadings to indicate the locations of five winter-grazing pastures belonging to Milford and his Combination. All of the areas were situated back off main highways, all fenced with barbed wire, all single-gated—one way in, one way out—unless a man chose to cut the barbed wire, which no rustler in his right mind would do. The main thing in rustling, besides stealing the stock and getting away with it, was not to leave any sign that a theft had been committed. There was no way a Combination could count its entire herd daily, weekly, or even monthly, especially during the winter. If a rustler could pick a gate lock, get into a winter pasture, steal some of the stock, and get out again without leaving any sign that he'd been there, the theft likely would not be discovered until roundup time in the spring.

Thirty minutes after leaving Bear Claw, Ed Polk drove down a rutted dirt road and parked fifty yards back from the first of the Combination's five gates. Reaching behind the seat for a short-handled feather duster, he stuck it in his back pocket as he alighted from the van. Walking the fifty yards to the pasture gate, he knelt and got out the spool of thread. Breaking off a length, he looped it around the very bottom of the gatepost and the fence post, drawing it taut, tying it securely. Standing, he stepped here and there to see if it could be detected from various directions. It couldn't—the light-brown thread blended perfectly with the colors nature had given the ground and the aged, split wood of the gate and fence posts.

With the feather duster, Polk brushed away the footprints he had made. Walking backward, bent over at the waist, he swept clean any sign that he had been there. He backed up nearly all the way to the van. When he straightened up, his spine cracked audibly, causing him to grimace in pain. Got to see me a chiropractor, he promised himself, soon's this here job's done.

Climbing back into the van, he headed for the next of the four remaining gates.

Davey Flood drove onto the Flathead reservation in his brother Duane's pickup truck and parked in front of an old corrugated tin building. Once a storage depot for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, it had long ago been abandoned by that agency and left to rust. Subsequently it had been converted into a hangout by some of the Flathead men. The place did not have a good reputation.

Davey hurried inside, out of the chilling night wind. The big room

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was blue with accumulated smoke. From a radio somewhere, Willie Nelson was singing that mamas shouldn't let their babies grow up to be cowboys. A plank resting on two oil drums served as a counter, behind which sat an ancient Indian man with a cigar box substituting for a cash register. Next to him was a household refrigerator with a magic-marker message scribbled on its door: Beer 50¢. Farther into the room was a solitary pool table probably as old as the man at the counter, with nets hanging under each pocket and a stark white strip of adhesive tape mending a rip near one corner of the felt. Four Flatheads were shooting imprecise pool while half a dozen others drank bottled beer and watched. Everybody paused to look at Davey as he entered. Two of the men, the Antler brothers, Will and Charley, exchanged glances, and Will Antler said, "Well, well, lookit who's here. How come you ain't wearing a number, Flood?"

Davey ignored the barb and went over to the old man. "Tenkiller around?" he asked.

Before the old man could answer, Charley Antler said, "Hey, Flood, you hard of hearing? My brother asked you a question."

Davey continued to look at the old man, waiting for an answer. The Antler brothers rose and walked toward him, expressions sullen. "You ain't in town now, Flood," Will Antler said. "This here's *our* place, man."

As Davey turned apprehensively to face their approach, a voice from the back of the room said evenly, "All right." Everyone looked back at a plywood-partitioned corner where a nickel-and-dime poker game remained in progress almost continually, only the players changing. The man who had spoken and was coming forward from the partition was Tommy Tenkiller, still holding five cards in his hands. He walked past the Antler brothers up to Davey. "You here to see me?"

"Yeah." Davey swallowed with relief. The Antlers together could have busted him up good and proper. They hated whites worse than they hated Crows.

Tommy turned to the brothers. "You got a problem with somebody coming here to see me?" His eyes were like two black drill-bits, penetrating the face of each brother as they flicked from one to the other.

"Hey, man, this is what we have to take when we go into places in town," Charley protested indignantly.

"Yeah, his kind gives it to us this way," Will seconded his brother.

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Tommy remained absolutely still, like a rattler ready to strike. "I asked if you got a problem with somebody coming here to see me?"

The brothers shifted their eyes self-consciously. Tommy was a Nez Perce: a pierced nose. The tiny notch cut out of his left nostril was a sign that he came from a dangerous breed of men. Both Antler brothers knew that the name Tenkiller had literal meaning: a man who had killed ten enemies. They had no way of knowing whether Tommy had actually earned his name or not. They didn't want to find out the hard way.

"We got no problem, Tom," Charley said, eyes downcast. They turned to back off.

"Hey, Charley," said Tommy. The brothers paused. Tommy handed Charley the five cards. "It's a good hand. If it wins the pot, you and your brother split it."

The Antlers grinned sheepishly and walked away with the cards. Tommy turned to Davey, still not smiling—these Flatheads would never see him smile. "What's up?" he asked.

"I've got Duane's truck. Let's talk outside."

Davey let the engine run to keep the heater going, and the two longtime friends passed some more of Leon Elk's bootleg mash back and forth. "I've changed my mind about going after the Combination again," Davey said.

Tommy Tenkiller did not ask why. It was enough for him to see Davey in old boots again instead of new prison shoes. Sometimes it took a man time to find his spirit.

"I want to do it right this time," Davey said. "I knew a feller in Deer Lodge, been throwing a wide loop all his life. He's a old man now. The Combination had him framed for a killing and he's doing life. But he told me how he'd be operating if he was out. First off, there's a feller up in Great Falls used to be in the cattle-transport business. Had a dozen tractor-trailer rigs with drivers hauling stock out of Montana all over the country. When the Combination came in with its own trucks, it cut off about ninety percent of his business. He's only got one big rig left and don't use it except in the spring to haul stock for a few small independents. Rest of the time he gets by running a U-Haul franchise. During the winter he'll lease that one big rig for a percentage of what's hauled in it, no questions asked."

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Davey saw in the dashboard lights that Tommy had pursed his lips in a silent whistle and looked worried. "What's the matter?"

"You're talking serious rustling."

Davey nodded. "I've got three convictions behind me, Tom. I go up again, it'll be for twenty-to-life. I ain't risking that for two or three head of stock."

"How many you figure to take?"

"Forty head."

"At one time? What the hell will we do with that many?"

"That's something else I learned in Deer Lodge. We can haul them down to Oklahoma. There's no brand-inspection law in Oklahoma. I got the name of a cattle auctioneer in Tulsa who'll give us four hundred dollars a head, unweighed, for full-growed stock. That'll be sixteen thousand dollars. One-fourth goes to the rig owner, you and me split twelve."

Davey took a drink. He waited for Tommy to say something. To say anything. The silence in the tight little truck cab began to thicken into tension. Finally, Davey felt he had to force the issue.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"I don't know, Davey." The Nez Perce shrugged. The warrior facade he wore for the benefit of others was now abandoned. This was friend-to-friend and went all the way back to nervous planning about how to sneak into the girls locker-room after one of their basketball games. Friends didn't have to put on acts for each other. "I never done nothing that big before," Tommy said. "It's kind of scary."

"I know. I feel the same way." Davey passed him the bottle. "But I've made up my mind to try. I need the money."

Again Tommy did not ask why, merely nodded silently. He closed his eyes for a moment of thought, opened them again, then took a long drink.

"Okay, pardner. I'm in."

From a different Holiday Inn room, this one in Missoula, Ed Polk made another call to Helen. "Hey, honey. It's me again."

"Oh. Why, hello, Ed. What a surprise."

Polk frowned. *What a surprise?* He'd told her he'd be calling back in a few days.

"Is something wrong, honey?" Polk asked.

"No. No, nothing's wrong, Ed. You just caught me a little off-guard, is all. How are you?"

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What the hell? "I'm fine, Helen. Just like I was when I called you from Butte. You *do* remember me calling you from Butte, don't you?"

"Certainly I do, Ed."

Her voice didn't become testy as it usually would have at such a question. Polk waited, a confounded expression on his face. But Helen didn't carry the conversation forward. Finally, perplexed, he asked, "Well?"

"Well what, Ed?"

"You know *what*, Helen. You said you was going to think things over and then we could talk about getting back together."

"Oh. Yes, that. Well, Ed, to tell you the truth, I haven't had time to give the matter much thought—"

"He's there with you, ain't he?" Polk asked bluntly.

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. Harley Bright. He's there with you right now, ain't he?"

"Why, yes, as a matter of fact, I do have company right now—"

"And you don't want to talk to me in front of him, do you?"

"No."

There it was. Nice and simple. Polk sighed quietly. "Well, what now, Helen?" he wanted to know.

"What do you mean, Ed?" she asked again.

"I mean, goddamn it, *what now?* Do I hang up and forget that you're my wife? Do I come back there and whip Harley Bright's ass all over town? Or do I just stick a rifle barrel in my mouth and pull the trigger? What do I do now, Helen?"

"You don't do anything stupid, Ed," she said, for the first time sounding like herself. "I told you I wanted us to stay friends even if—"

"I know what you told me, Helen," he interrupted. The soft suedeness had gone out of his voice, leaving it sandpapery.

"I really meant it, Ed."

"Do you honestly think there's still a chance for us?" he asked. "Or are you just letting me down easy?"

"I've never wanted to hurt you, Ed," she stepped around a direct answer, "but I do believe we need more time to think."

Polk sighed again. It was over. Done. He could feel it. Helen was just trying to keep it from getting messy. "All right, Helen," he said resignedly. "Maybe you're right."

"Things'll work out for the best, Ed," she said brightly. "You'll see."

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"Sure." Suddenly he didn't want to talk to her any longer. He hated the thought that Harley Bright could hear her words, too. "Well, listen," he told her, "I'll go on and do this job and then I'll send you some money for the bills. If you want to talk again, we can. If not, well—"

"I think that's a good idea," she said, seizing on an opportunity to end the conversation.

"Helen, what time is it?" Polk asked abruptly. "My watch has stopped."

"It's quarter of ten here in Florida, Ed. But it's two hours earlier there, isn't it?"

"Yes. Two hours earlier. Well, I'll let you go now, Helen. Maybe I'll talk to you soon. Take care of yourself."

Polk hung up. For a moment he just stared at his watch, which had not stopped at all. It was seven-thirty. Helen always kept the clock in the bedroom fifteen minutes fast.

Putting on his coat and Stetson, Polk walked next door to a liquor store. "Fifth of Jack Daniels," he told the clerk.

Driving the tractor-trailer rig back from Great Falls, Davey Flood pulled in at a truck stop in Helena and parked. "You go in and get something to eat," he told Tommy Tenkiller. "I've got something I have to do."

Davey looked up the address of the Hobart Institute and found the right city bus to take him there. It was different than he expected, not like a school, or even a hospital, at all—more like a large house with a big family living in it.

"Who did you want to see?" asked a young woman who answered the door.

"I'm not sure," Davey told her. "My nephew was brought here last spring to be checked. I wanted to talk to somebody about him."

"Dr. Lunden is our staff director. She can probably help you."

Phyllis Lunden was fifty, dressed in a pants suit, and reminded Davey of an elementary-school principal he'd once liked. After he sat down in her office and explained who he was, she said, "Oh, yes. I remember the boy. Enormous musical comprehension. Well, what can I do for you?"

"I want to send you six thousand dollars to pay for Larry Joe's first two years here," Davey said. He paused a beat, then added, "But I don't want you to tell my brother or his wife where the money came from."

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Dr. Lunden frowned. "I'm not sure I can make such an arrangement. That's a most unusual request. May I ask why?"

Davey shrugged. "My brother and me, we don't get on too well. He's strictly a straight-arrow type and I'm kind of like a black sheep. Duane and his wife haven't never approved of some of the things I've did. They'd never take no money from me, even to help Larry Joe, 'cause they couldn't be sure where the money came from. But it don't seem quite fair to me that the boy should have to pay for our differences. So I'm trying to get around the problem."

"I see." Dr. Lunden studied him curiously. "I don't suppose I should ask where the six thousand dollars is coming from?"

"No, ma'am. I'll just tell you that I'm not taking it away from nobody. I'm not hurting nobody to get it." Davey's words were sincere. To him, the Combination was not somebody, it was a *thing*.

Dr. Lunden was uneasy. "I appreciate what you're trying to do. I simply—well, I can't involve the institute in anything, ah—"

"Let me send the money to *you*, then," Davey suggested. "You personally. You can tell my brother and his wife that you're paying his way."

"I can't let you send me six thousand dollars. We're perfect strangers. How do you know that I wouldn't—"

"You wouldn't," Davey interrupted. "Nice lady like you that tries to help unfortunate kids. I trust you." He leaned forward intensely. "Look, ma'am, ain't the important thing finding a way to help this boy? You told my brother and his wife that he could be helped. *They* want to help him, *I* want to help him, *you* want to help him. A smart lady like you's got to be able to figure a way. Please."

"Oh, my," Phyllis Lunden said, putting a hand to her throat. She smiled tentatively. "You remind me of a young man I knew in college. My freshman year. He wasn't articulate, but he was a good talker." Her eyes radiated for an instant. "A *very* good talker." Suddenly she folded her hands together on her desk blotter. "I suppose I *could* establish a scholarship with any anonymous money I received, and I could select any student I chose to use that scholarship—"

Davey smiled and accepted one of the business cards Phyllis Lunden took from a small holder on her desk.

When they left Helena, Davey and Tommy Tenkiller highballed the tractor-trailer rig along Route 12, over McDonald Pass and down into Garrison, where they hit Interstate 90 and turned north. They

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made Missoula in two hours, skirted its northern edge, and headed up Route 93 past St. Ignatius Mission, on past the bison range at Agency, and finally past Kicking Horse Reservoir. At Pablo, they stopped long enough to pick up two horses and tack that Tommy had rented from a Flathead family. Then they continued north.

Two miles out of Big Arm, Tommy bobbed his chin at a dirt road up ahead. "Turn in there."

A mile down the dirt road was a gradual slope off to one side that led to a gully wide enough to accommodate the rig. Parking, the two men opened the trailer doors, pulled out the loading ramp, and walked the horses off. As they saddled up, Davey asked, "How far away's the stock?"

"Two, maybe three miles," Tommy said. "The gate's only about a mile."

Leaving the truck open and the ramp down, the men swung into their saddles and guided the mounts up out of the gully. They rode side by side, at an easy canter, across the hard winter prairie. Above them the sky was slate-colored, around them only a whisper of wind. Tommy hunched his shoulders. "Snow," he said simply. "Soon."

Davey nodded without answering. Inside, his stomach churned once. This was tough country, steep and wild on all sides. It wasn't the Montana of ski-and-Brie, condos by a golf course, prefab log cabins. This was the Montana where a man had to know things. He had to know the creeks, slopes, and ridges, the aspen and juniper. Know where the grouse were, where the deer pawed to feed, where the ice made water and the water made summer grass—where the sky warned you once, and only once.

"We'll have to hurry," Davey said. In unison, they heeled their horses to a gallop.

At the gated barbed-wire fence, Davey dismounted and looked back. He couldn't see the rig down in the gully, at all. Turning to the gate, he removed a small vinyl kit from his jacket pocket. When he unrolled it in one hand, he exposed an eighteen-piece set of hexagonal key wrenches. Sitting down on one heel, he began inserting first one, then another of the tools into the key passage of the gate lock. The fifth one he tried connected with a tumbler in the lock mechanism. From then on, it was only a matter of patience.

It took him eight minutes to pick the lock. Davey opened the gate and held it while Tommy led the horses through. From a saddlebag, Tommy removed several one-foot lengths of pine-needle branches tied together with rawhide. Passing the bridle reins to Davey, the

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Nez Perce brushed away all the hoofprints outside the gate. After the gate was closed, Tommy swept the ground inside the fence as Davey led the horses farther away. When the ground was clean far enough away from the fence, the two men remounted and left at a gallop, heading for a winter pasture that lay beyond the trees and just above the prairie.

Ed Polk twisted a corner off a plug of Red Man chewing tobacco and stuck it far back in one cheek as he leaned against the fender of the van and studied the slate sky. From the looks of it, he thought, he'd barely have time to check the gate up ahead and two others before snow started falling. All week Polk had been checking each of the Combination's five gates four times a day. From Kalispell, where he now had a motel room, he drove nine miles every morning to the northern shore of Flathead Lake, then made a complete circuit around the lake—eighty-one miles—turning off the main highway at each of five dirt roads that led to a gate. As usual, he didn't drive directly up to the gates, but parked off on the prairie and walked up. He had to walk all the way up to each gate because the thread he had tied in place was that hard to see. After each inspection, he was then required to feather-dust his footprints away, because no self-respecting rustler was going to enter a gate around which there was fresh sign of activity.

The constant bending and walking backward was wreaking havoc with Polk's lumbar region. Not so much in the mornings, but later. He made his first run around the lake just after dawn, then parked for a spell in the trees somewhere to drink coffee from his thermos and read the morning paper he had picked up at the motel. After the sun was well up, he made a second run. For lunch he returned to Kalispell or drove up to Whitefish or down to Bigfork. He made a point of never patronizing the same cafe twice, so as not to become familiar to anyone.

In the early afternoon, he would circuit the lake again, then park to rest. By this time his back would be raising holy hell with him and he would have to force himself to make the final run, which he'd finish just at dusk and head back to his room. He'd bought a heating pad two days earlier, and that gave him some comfort at night. Getting through the afternoon was the problem.

As he returned the plug of Red Man to his pocket, Polk reached behind himself and massaged his lower back. What he wouldn't give to know Helen was waiting in the room for him, with her long,

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strong fingers that would rub away his aches and soreness like magic. Do lots of other things like magic, too, he thought. Which she was probably doing for that son of a bitch Harley Bright now. Should have gone to Allstate, he thought wryly, spitting off to the side.

Reaching inside the van for his feather duster, he began his weary trudge across the fifty or so yards to the pasture gate. As he neared it, he tried to step as lightly as possible so the dusting would be easier. If the impending snowfall was as heavy as it looked like it would be, he might have to put chains on the van's tires tomorrow—

Polk's train of thought stopped abruptly. Suddenly tomorrow did not interest him. He had reached the gate and bent to look at the thread. But the thread was not there.

When Davey and Tommy rode back up to the gate, driving forty head of Combination cattle, there was no sign that anyone had been there—the ground was swept as clean as they had left it. Opening the gate, the two men used knotted lariats as prods and moved the cattle past the fence. Riding one on each side and working their horses expertly up and down the line, they managed to keep the small herd corralled and drove it briskly across the prairie. Within minutes, the stolen cattle had been hurried to the gully below the dirt road and whistled, poked, and goaded up the ramp into the trailer. When they were securely aboard, Davey and Tommy, still mounted, paused and looked skyward.

"Any time now," the Indian said. "Want to let the snow cover our tracks?"

Davey considered it. He had closed the gate so that it looked locked, but to really cover their theft he should actually relock it with the hex wrenches. Then there would only be the sweeping of the ground signs and their trail would be covered, they could put the horses aboard the rig and drive away. The snow probably *would* cover their sign if they didn't go back, but three convictions behind him and twenty-to-life ahead of him made Davey decide not to try and expedite their getaway.

"Let's do it right," he said.

Tommy nodded. They reined their mounts around and galloped back toward the gate. In minutes they were there, had the horses tethered, and had swept the area inside the fence. Davey was getting ready to relock the gate when Tommy said, "I think we're made, pardner."

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Davey's eyes followed Tommy's gaze out onto the prairie where, a mile or so in the distance, a dust stream was rising in the wake of a vehicle heading directly toward them. Davey's expression registered first disbelief, then disgust. Shaking his head, he folded the wrench kit back up. He felt like cursing and crying at the same time.

"Got to be the law, right?" Tommy said.

Davey nodded. "One kind or another. Deputies. Security guards. Range cop. Don't make no difference." Suddenly his mind locked in on directions. "Whoever it is ain't coming from where the rig's at. Maybe there's a chance it ain't been found. Mount up, quick!"

On their horses, they reined in close together, watching the dust trail grow larger. "You thinking what I'm thinking?" Tommy asked. "That they can't follow both of us?"

"Right. One of us can make it back to the rig and maybe get away with it, take the sucker to Tulsa. There's a road map in the glove compartment with the name and address of the auctioneer I called. And listen—" Davey took Dr. Phyllis Lunden's business card from his wallet and handed it to Tommy "—if you make it and I don't, give my share of the money to this lady. She'll know what it's for."

They exchanged quick, nervous grins, and as they did so the big sky of Montana opened up and great fluffy wet flakes of snow began falling.

"See you," Tommy Tenkiller said, bobbing his chin at Davey.

"Hope so," Davey said.

They reined their mounts around sharply and heeled them to fast gallops in opposite directions.

The ground was already slick with snow when Polk's van skidded to a stop at the gate. He leapt from the cab and scrambled onto the slippery hood, balancing precariously as he focused twelve-power binoculars first in one direction, then the other. Two riders, heading off from each other, moving fast, their backs to Polk. Falling snowflakes wet the front lenses of the binoculars and Polk, muttering a curse, wiped them off with the elbow of one sleeve. He quickly looked again, first one way, then the other. One of the riders would be young Flood, but which one?

Polk suddenly remembered Milford, the cattleman, saying that Flood had once worked with an Indian partner. Switching the binoculars back and forth some more, he studied the riders. The one off to the right was reining his horse with one hand, trailing the

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other arm to his side and back, like most Indians learned to ride. The rider off to Polk's left was hunched forward in the saddle with both elbows tucked to his sides as if he had both hands on the reins, like most white cowboys.

Smiling tightly, Polk cautiously got down off the hood and slid back into the driver's seat. The engine was still running—all he had to do was shift gears. He cut the wheels to the left, eased the van through the still-open gate, and started after the rider he had decided was Dave Flood.

Came damned near blowing this one, he thought, switching on the wipers against the now heavily falling snow. Earlier, when Polk had checked the gate and found the thread gone, he'd had no way of knowing whether anyone was still inside the fence or not. Whoever had swept the ground had done a good job of it—probably the Indian. Polk couldn't stay and guard the gate or go beyond the fence to look for intruders without first assuring himself that the rustlers hadn't already been in and out. The gate was unlocked, but that meant nothing. Only the most meticulous rustler would have relocked it, and this young man was really little more than an amateur.

Looking around the outside perimeter, Polk had found no sign of any cattle having been moved, but that was also no criterion—one or even several head could have been led across rough prairie without leaving obvious sign. And at that moment, Polk didn't have time to look for hidden sign: a crushed gumweed or a freshly broken twig. All he took time to do was sweep his own sign away, in case the intruder was still inside. Then he had begun a gridlike pattern of searching up and down the fence line in the van, returning to check the gate every fifteen or twenty minutes, always staying between the main highway and the fence so that nobody could get past him without him seeing their dust.

Even so, he thought as he hunched forward to peer through the windshield, he still had damned near missed them. When he first sighted them with the binoculars from far out on the prairie, they had been sweeping their own sign away—and there were no cattle in sight. They must, he decided, have secured them in a nearby temporary corral of some kind, back in the trees or down a slope somewhere, perhaps planning to return for them later with a truck. No matter, in minutes they might have been gone—and his fee gone with them.

Now, as the snow continued, Polk twice had to stop the van and stand up out of the cab with his binoculars to find the direction in

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which the horseman was riding—the volume of snowfall was covering the horse's hoofprints too quickly to follow. But Polk was able, by one means or another, to keep on the trail as it led him far out onto the wide, open range. He figured he had gone about six miles when the van, without chains or snow tires, slogged as far as it could into the drifting snow and stalled.

Tying a bandanna around his lower face, Polk got out and opened the rear cargo doors. He dragged out the Arctic Cat and fired it up. Securely placing his rifle and one of the haversacks in the rear seat, he lowered his aching back into the front seat and started off across the vast field of whiteness that lay before him.

Shouldn't be but a few more miles, he thought. That young feller's horse wouldn't be able to make it through drifts much higher than this.

Davey Flood was sitting at the side of a banked snowdrift when Polk came to a stop twenty feet away in the Cat. Davey's horse was lying nearby, whinnying in pain, an edge of bone showing just above the right rear fetlock. Polk stepped out of the snowmobile, rifle in hand, and slogged over to them through the snow. Davey looked up.

"She slipped on an icy rock," he said. "I don't have no gun."

Polk went over to the agonized animal and shot it once, cleanly, in the head. The rifle report seemed to echo forever. Then there was only silence, not even a wind sound, and the snow continued falling heavily.

"You the law?" Davey asked when Polk came back.

"Close enough to it," Polk replied. He jerked his head toward the Cat. Davey rose and they walked to it together. Polk pulled the haversack out of the rear seat and set it on the ground. "Get a fuel cylinder out of there," he said.

Davey opened the haversack and looked dumfoundedly at Polk. The range detective frowned and looked in the haversack himself. It contained a thermos, a water jug, and an unopened fifth of Jack Daniels. No fuel cylinders.

"Son of a bitch," Polk muttered.

Both men looked around at the rapidly drifting snow, then back at each other. It wasn't necessary to speak; there was nothing to say. Polk put the rifle in the rear seat and they both sat down in the snow and leaned back against the Cat. Polk took the bottle of whiskey out of the haversack. Wonder what Helen would think, he asked himself, down there in sunny Florida with Harley Bright, if

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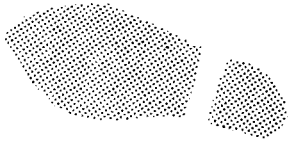
she knew he'd bought a bottle several days ago and never opened it?

Pulling the cork, he took a long slow swallow, then passed the bottle to Davey. "Know where we went wrong, boy?" he asked rhetorically. "We should have both gone into the insurance business."

Davey stared at him for a second, then shrugged. "Whatever you say, mister." He raised the bottle to his own lips.



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MAKE $1,000's WHOLESALING. Over 3,000 items. $3.00 brings giant catalog and complete program. Rancifer Ventures, 1906 Idlewood Drive, Dept. IO-8, East Point, GA 30344.

TAKE PICTURES for profit. Try our unique methods. Write: Photomoney, 14589H West 32nd, Golden, CO 80401.

HUNDREDS WEEKLY Home Mailing Program. Free Details. MMI-U, Box 339, Mechanicsburg, PA 17055.

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included in the next issue please send order and remittance to I. M. Bozoki, Classified Ad Manager, DAVIS PUBLICATIONS, INC., 380 Lexington Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017.

BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES—Cont'd

"$1,000's WEEKLY!" MAILING LETTERS! FANTASTIC OPPORTUNITY! EXCITING FREE DETAIL$! START IMMEDIATELY! WRITE: $UCCESS, #605-DPG, DRESHER, PA 19025.

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WITCHCRAFT Occult Miracle Power Secrets Gavin and Yvonne Frost. Now accepting students. 1502-AN, New Bern, N.C. 28560.

GIFTS THAT PLEASE

A gift sure to please—ISAAC ASIMOV's SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE, published monthly. Send $19.50 for 13 issues (includes shipping & postage) to Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, P.O. Box 1933, Marion, OH 43305.

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"GOVERNMENT SURPLUS" JEEPS $30.00! 5,000,000 Items! Complete Information Your Area. 1987 OFFICIAL DIRECTORY. $3.00 (Guaranteed). SURPLUS, (B116), 4620 Wisconsin Northwest, WASHINGTON, DC 20016.

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BORROW $25,000 "OVERNIGHT". Any purpose. Keep indefinitely! Free Report! Success Research, Box 19739-SX, Indianapolis, IN 46219.

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Classified Continued

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OLD-TIME RADIO—The best shows on reels or cassettes. Best quality, fastest service. Catalog $1.00: P.O. Box 3509, Lakeland, FL 33802.

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GOOD MONEY! Weekly! Processing mail! Free Supplies, Postage! No Selling! Information? Rush stamped envelope! Foodmaster-DCM, Burnt Hills, NY 12027.

"1,000'S WEEKLY"! $ECURING/$TUFFING ENVELOPES! $TART IMMEDIATELY! FREE DETAILS! WRITE: ASSOCIATES, #210-DPG, MAPLE GLEN, PA 19002.

EASY Business, earn $1,000's Weekly! Free details! Send Stamped Addressed Envelope: Todco, Dept. 3, 4219 W. Olive Ave., Burbank, CA 91505.

TEACHERS. Self-employment pays. Dynamite details. Send $3.50 to: Ann Enterprises, Box 900, Brookline, MA 02146.

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CAN YOU STUFF 1000 envelopes for $500.00 weekly? Send six 22¢ stamps. Blume, Box 460159, Garland, TX 75046.

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B. E. Steele, Trans Medium will answer three questions for $10.00. Send M.O. to: 6417 Amanda Lane, Ravenna, Ohio 44266.

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ORIENTAL ladies seeking correspondence, marriage. Presentations by American husband, Filipina wife. Asian Experience, Box 1214T, Novato, CA 94948.

BEAUTIFUL GIRLS, worldwide, want correspondence, friendship, marriage. Details, photos free! Rothe, Box 270/D, Berlin 61, W. Germany.

READ "How to Write a Classified Ad That Pulls." Instructive booklet tells how to write an effective classified ad. Also includes certificates worth $2.00 toward a classified ad in any of our publications. For your copy send $2.25 (includes postage) to I. M. Bozoki, Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10017.

PRINTING, MIMEOGRAPHING & MULTIGRAPHING

PRINT Booklets 3¢. Print 1000 8½ x 11, $15.12. Booklet Planning-Pricer Free Speedibooks, 23860-5Q Miles, Cleveland, Ohio 44128.

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GENUINE TEXAS TACO RECIPES! 10 Different. Bonus includes easy beef jerky recipe. $3.00. Tenney, 8634 Serene Ridge, San Antonio, Texas 78239.

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CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING ORDER FORM

Send to **ELLERY QUEEN MAGAZINE**
Classified Advertising Department/Suite 1401
380 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017

15 WORD MINIMUM
Only $48.00 for 15 Words or Less
$3.20 each additional word
Capitalized words add—40¢ per word
SAVE 15% WITH 3 CONSECUTIVE MONTHS SAME COPY ORDER

DEADLINE: Copy and payment must be in by the 5th day of the third preceding month for issue in which ad is to appear.

(PLEASE PRINT OR TYPE)

YOUR NAME_____

FIRM (NAME IN AD)_____

ADDRESS_____

CITY_____ **STATE**_____ **ZIP**_____

PHONE:_____ **DATE:**_____

YOUR SIGNATURE_____

_____ Words at $3.20 each $ . . . . .

_____ Capitalized word at .40¢ each
Total amount for 1 ad $ _____

15% Savings with 3 Consecutive Months Discount

(a) Multiply one ad total $_____ x 3 = $ . . . .
(b) Multiply total amount on above line by x .85
(c) Total amount for 3 ads $

(Example: One 15 word ad $48.00 x 3 months = $144.00 x .85 = $122.40)

$_____ is enclosed for _____ insertion(s) in the _____ issue(s) _____ Heading

(FOR ADDITIONAL WORDS ATTACH SEPARATE SHEET)

(1) **$48.00**	(2) **$48.00**	(3) **$48.00**	(4) **$48.00**	(5) **$48.00**
(6) **$48.00**	(7) **$48.00**	(8) **$48.00**	(9) **$48.00**	(10) **$48.00**
(11) **$48.00**	(12) **$48.00**	(13) **$48.00**	(14) **$48.00**	(15) **$48.00**
(16) **$51.20**	(17) **$54.40**	(18) **$57.60**	(19) **$60.80**	(20) **$64.00**
(21) **$67.20**	(22) **$70.40**	(23) **$73.60**	(24) **$76.80**	(25) **$80.00**
(26) **$83.20**	(27) **$86.40**	(28) **$89.60**	(29) **$92.80**	(30) **$96.00**

HOW TO COUNT WORDS: Name and address must be included in counting the number of Words in your ad. Each initial or number counts as 1 word: Mark Holly. 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017: 7 WORDS: Zip codes are not counted. Phone #: 2 Words. Symbols used as keys are charged for. City or State count as 1 word each: Garden City, New York: 2 words. Abbreviations such as C.O.D., F.O.B., P.O., U.S.A., 7x10, 35*mm* count as 1 word. (P.O. Box 145 count as 3 words) Webster's International Unabridged Dictionary will be used as our authority for spelling, compound words, hyphens, abbreviations, etc. **Please make checks payable to ELLERY QUEEN MAGAZINE.**

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NEXT ISSUE...

12 *NEW* stories—including

MICHAEL GILBERT (about Jonas Pickett)
ERNEST SAVAGE (about what is well made)
MARGARET YORKE (about an anniversary)
EDWARD D. HOCH (about Nick Velvet)
WILLIAM BANKIER (murders in Brighton)
SHARYN McCRUMB (about an unbeautiful bride)
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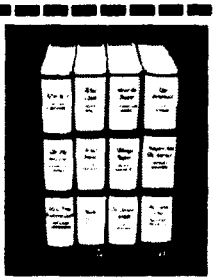

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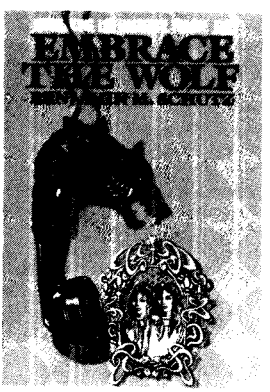

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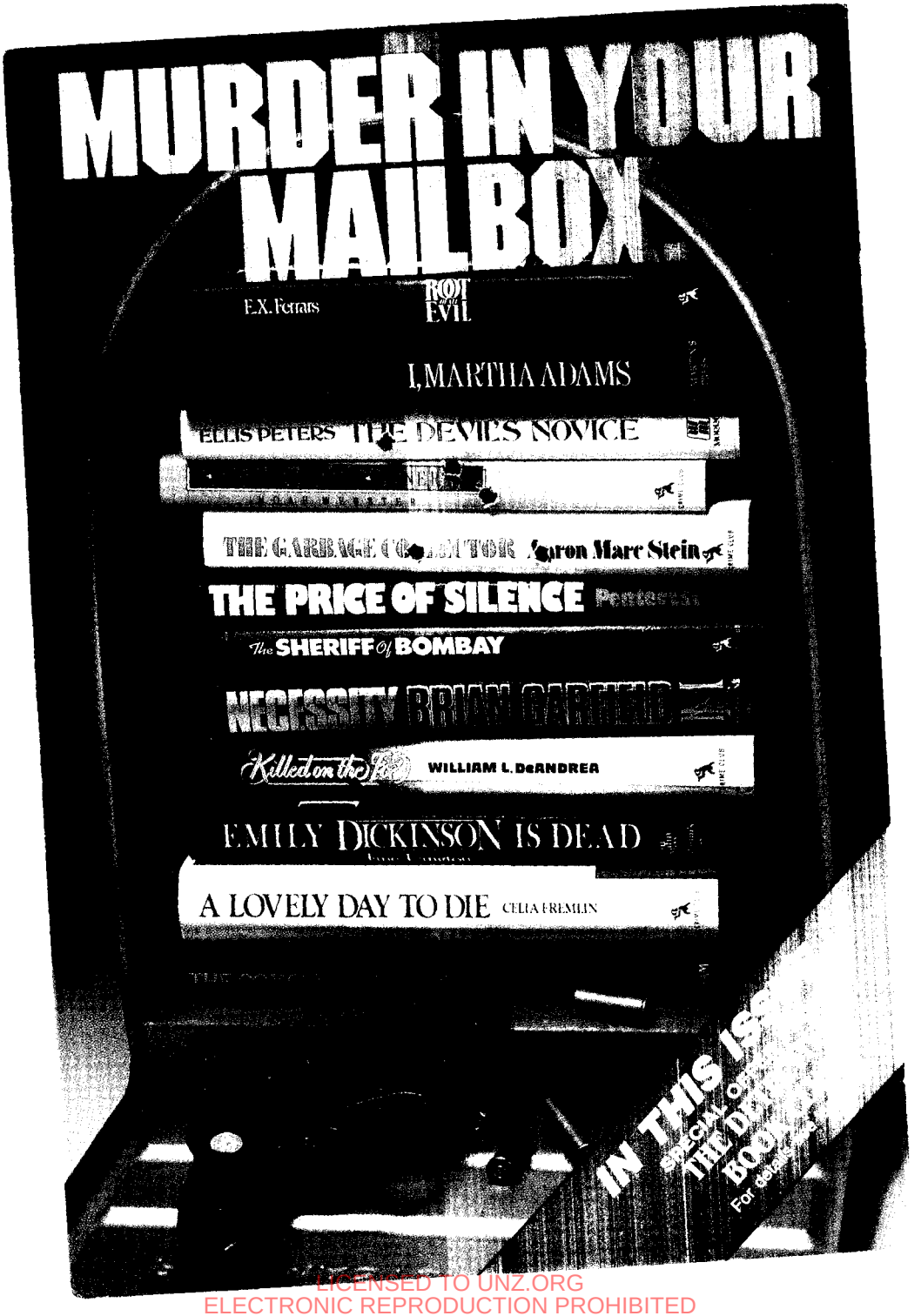

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